JANUARY 35 Cents

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Charlotte Armstrong
TEN CLUES FOR MR. POLKINGHORN

Cornell Woolrich
Margery Allingham
Verne Athanas

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**
TITLE:	***Ten Clues for Mr. Polkinghorn***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Amos Polkinghorn, mystery writer
LOCALE:	A suburb in the United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Mr. Polkinghorn could see the newspaper headline:* NOTED MYSTERY WRITER SOLVES POLICE PROBLEM IN REAL LIFE. *It was a cinch for a man with a trained deductive mind who had no less than ten clues.*

MR. AMOS POLKINGHORN, 49, CREator of Daniel Dean, Ace Detective (whose cases no lending library would be without), walked down the driveway of his suburban home one morning to peer up the street for the mailman. The mailman was not even on the horizon. Mr. Polkinghorn, walking back, was very much startled to see, on the edge of the glass curtains in the window next door, a set of fingers.

This was odd, because the house next door was empty. The family was away.

The fictional Daniel Dean would have taken this without the quiver of an eyelash. But Mr. Polkinghorn found his own mouth dry, his knees weak, his heart flopping. He staggered to refuge within his front door and took a full minute to get his breath before he called the police.

Nor, during the interval before they came, could he think of a single clever ruse. Meanwhile, the mailman appeared. Mr. Polkinghorn did absolutely nothing to warn the mailman. He watched (taking care not to let his own fingers or any other part of him show at his window) as the mailman went up upon the Arnolds' porch, put the letters in the slot, and returned to the sidewalk as safely as usual. Mr. Polkinghorn, much relieved, reminded himself that he, Mr. Polkinghorn, was ac-

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tually doing all a citizen is expected to do; that it was only his occupation that engendered this self-reproach and made him feel that he *ought* to have disguised himself as the mailman. Or something.

By the time the police came, in the shape of a couple of men in plain clothes, Mr. Polkinghorn had managed to work himself into an attitude of intrepid curiosity more becoming to a well-known mystery-story writer. He observed that the plainclothesmen had no ruse. They marched around, found the Arnolds' back door unlocked, and nobody in the house.

On the kitchen table, however, was a big fat clue. The situation suddenly developed a certain piquancy.

The police officers' names were Conners and Farley. They knew who Mr. Polkinghorn was, and what he did, and they didn't mind telling him all they knew about this real-life mystery. In fact, Mr. Polkinghorn noted within himself, the situation was classic. The regular police were presenting the amateur criminologist with a pretty little problem.

Mr. Polkinghorn sat at the Arnolds' kitchen table and listened, lifting his somewhat snub nose in unconscious longing for the hawk-like profile of his figment of the imagination, Daniel Dean.

Conners said, "Well, sir, this plain cloth cap was made and worn in the State Prison. No doubt about that. Now, ten days ago, three convicts escaped. The alarm's still out. But we *know* what happened to two of them. Seems, one night a week ago, two men showed up in a boatyard upshore a ways and knocked down a fella fussing with his sailboat. The fella didn't get a good look, but he knew they were convicts, all right, from what he heard them say. So the convicts took the boat and went off into the Sound. Boat capsized in a quick squall. Witnesses to the wreck searched all night, but found no bodies. Haven't found them yet. But those two couldn't have made it to shore. So we *know* that two of those three men got themselves drowned. Now, sir, according to the evidence of this cap, the *third* escaped convict must have holed up in this house for the last week or so. Question is, which one was he?"

"This matters?" said Mr. Polkhorn, casting a keen glance upward. "Yes, I see."

"Matters, because if you got the alarm out for a man, it's better to know who the man is," said Farley. He was youngish and had a nice Irish grin.

"Very interesting." Mr. Polkinghorn pursed his lips.

"You saw his fingers less than forty minutes ago. He couldn't have got very far. Maybe he'll be picked up. Then again, maybe not." Conners implied vast police machinery in motion. "Be easier if we knew which one we were looking for."

"One ought," said Mr. Polking-

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horn thoughtfully, "to be able to deduce that." The two policemen were respectfully silent. "How did he dare hide in this house? How did he know it was empty and would remain empty?" mused Mr. Polkinghorn, his wits beginning to work in familiar grooves.

Conners said, "Because this Mrs. Arnold, she pinned a note on the back door for the milkman. Here it is. Says: 'No milk for ten days.' Says: 'Back Tuesday, the tenth.'"

"And that's tomorrow," Farley said. "The man could read, I guess."

"A reasonable deduction," said Mr. Polkinghorn exhibiting Daniel Dean's most charming smile.

"Well, we got the Arnolds on the phone and they're hurrying right back. Be here in a coupla hours. Probably they can tell us if anything's missing, for instance."

"It's quite possible," said Mr. Polkinghorn, "that in the meantime we can discover something. I doubt very much, gentlemen"—he was talking just like Daniel Dean, he couldn't help it—"whether a man can remain in a house for a week's time and leave no traces of his personality. We should be able to find those traces. That is, if you can tell about the personalities of these three convicts."

"Tell you what we know?" said Conners. "Sure."

Mr. Polkinghorn took out pencil and paper. He was thrilled and happy. He saw the publicity already. *Noted Mystery Writer Solves Police Problem in Real Life.* "It was," he could hear himself saying with a twisted smile, "elementary."

"One of them," said Conners, "was named Mario Cossetti. Age 29. Caucasian. Five foot five. 155 pounds. Dark hair, dark eyes. Dark complexion. Artificial right foot. Lost foot in action—navy man. Up for armed robbery. This the kind of thing you mean?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Polkinghorn, scribbling delightedly. "Anything more about his background?"

"New York City. Lower East Side. Never finished high school."

"Very good."

"Yeah. Well, then there was Glenway Sparrow. Age 42. Caucasian. Five foot eleven. 125 pounds. Gray eyes, gray hair." Conners warmed up to this work. "Never in the service. 4-F. Ex-editor. College man. Up for conspiracy to defraud. A con man, from way back. I hear," said Conners in a gossipy fashion, "Glen was real mad at the Judge. Also, he's supposed to be mean and brainy and nervous about his health."

Mr. Polkinghorn was making neat columns out of this information.

"Third fella was Matthew Hoose. Age 24. Six foot one. 195 pounds. Red hair, blue eyes. Had two years service in the army, where his record is only fair. Went up for manslaughter. Fight in a bar. Comes from Kentucky. Unemployed at time of arrest. Just an unlucky kid, I guess."

"What do you say, Mr. Polking-

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horn?" Farley grinned. "Maybe I should have asked, what Daniel Dean would say."

Mr. Polkinghorn rose. He was expanding, happily at home in the safe province of the inquiring mind. "Daniel Dean would look around the house," he announced. "May I?"

Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, with their boy, Bob, and their little girl, Ginny, had gone down to the seashore for Mr. Arnolds' two weeks vacation. They had long been very pleasant neighbors to Mr. Polkinghorn. Just an ordinary suburban family. Not, of course, his intimates, for they were hardly intellectuals, and besides, they were no fans of Daniel Dean. Nor was there anything about them to make fodder for Mr. Polkinghorn's imagination. Nods and good mornings passed over the hedge, amiable agreements about shoveling snow, and so on. Mr. Polkinghorn had never before set foot in this house.

Now, however, he prowled through it, through every room, with his eyes darting, his brain buzzing furiously. It was a big old rambling house, stuffed full of all kinds of objects, and the tour took Mr. Polkinghorn some time.

At last, however, he sat down again in a kitchen chair and spread his notes on the kitchen table. Farley was already sitting down, yawning a little. Conners, who had trailed Mr. Polkinghorn and stimulated him to lip-pursing and eye-rolling by his stolid presence, now sat down too. These policemen had to wait for the Arnolds' return, anyhow. They were quite willing to listen when Mr. Polkinghorn looked up from rearranging his notes.

"It is a nice little problem," he announced. "A very nice one indeed."

"Whatja find?" said Farley sleepily.

"What," said Mr. Polkinghorn somewhat dramatically, "do you make of that?" He indicated a small dirty scrap of paper on which something had been written in blurring worn pencil marks.

Tom may let ida po but asp san bag.

Farley picked it up and read off the nonsense syllables. "Wherja get this?"

"Under a chair. How did they escape from that prison?" snapped Mr. Polkinghorn, in Daniel Dean's crisp voice. "With outside assistance?"

Conners stared.

"This code message," said Mr. Polkinghorn shrewdly, "must have served a purpose." They both stared at him respectfully. "I suggest it belonged to Sparrow," said Mr. Polkinghorn. "Why? Because he was the brains. I think we may say that if there was a code message from the outside, it would have gone to Sparrow. However," he went on, joyfully dragging in the red herring just as he would have done in Chapter Two, "on the bookshelf in the living room there is a

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cotton sock. Perhaps you noticed it? New, clean, never worn. One blue-and-white cotton sock." He paused. They didn't respond. "Why only one?" prodded Mr. Polkinghorn. "Did Cossetti, the one-footed man, help himself to one clean sock to comfort his living foot? Not bothering about the artificial one?"

"See what you mean," said Conners, though somewhat doubtfully.

"Not conclusive at all, of course," said Mr. Polkinghorn. "Although I find two more slight indications that point to Cossetti."

"How many indications you got there?" inquired Conners amiably.

"*Ten,*" said Mr. Polkinghorn. "Of which *three* point to Cossetti, *one* points possibly to Matthew Hoose, *one* may well eliminate him, and *five* of my little indications point, or so it seems to me, to Sparrow."

"So you'd say it was Sparrow?"

Mr. Polkinghorn didn't like people jumping to the end of the story. He liked the exposition for its own sake. "Let me continue," he said, chidingly.

They were silent.

"Now, to go on with Cossetti," he said. "You have noticed that on the kitchen counter, there, we see seven empty cans. Perhaps it is significant that they have not been thrown out to be collected. Perhaps the man who ate the contents of those seven cans did not wish them to be seen." His listeners nodded. "All seven of those cans," said Mr. Polkinghorn, "once held spaghetti."

"Italian!" said Farley. "And that's Cossetti." He looked impressed.

"Exactly. Now, I did not care to touch it since its position may be significant, but under the dining-room table you may have noticed a long rope-like affair, made of neckties, knotted together."

"Saw that," said Conners. "What's it for?"

Mr. Polkinghorn simply had been unable to imagine what it was for unless the unfortunate had thought of suicide—but surely not under the dining-room table! So he shrugged and said, "Whatever it is for, if you examined the knots, you saw that they are elaborate and all different. Whoever made that thing knew his knots. Didn't you tell me this Cossetti was in the navy?"

Their faces were blank—stunned, he supposed. Mr. Polkinghorn cleared his throat. "But let us leave Cossetti for the moment and go on to Hoose. You noticed the empty liquor bottle? The *only* empty one? There is quite an ample and variegated supply in Mr. Arnold's liquor closet. But the kind that has been most recently taken is . . . bourbon."

"*Kentucky!*" said Farley. "Say, I'm getting on to this! What d'ya call it? Deducting?"

Mr. Polkinghorn was rather suspicious of the glance that now passed between the two plainsclothesmen. It had a wink-like quality. He went on somewhat loftily, deliberately abandoning the suspense hovering about Hoose. "To return to Sparrow.

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Now, none of the beds, as you undoubtedly noted, seem to have been disturbed. I can only imagine that the man, knowing himself to be hunted, preferred to snatch his sleep on the couch downstairs where he could more easily escape if anyone came. You remarked the afghan? The crushed pillows? Next to that long green couch in the living room you must have seen, on the coffee table, those two empty aspirin bottles. Isn't it true that this man, Sparrow, was the only one of the three in less than robust health? He is the very thin man, the 4-F, the brainy, nervous, highstrung one. *He* would have been the one of the three to take aspirin." Mr. Polkinghorn swam along, his confidence increasing. "Also, you may have noticed the pile of old magazines on the floor in there. The scissors? Did you notice that small pieces have been clipped out of those magazines? Did you not tell me that this Sparrow was angry at some Judge? Can you not imagine that he may have been composing an anonymous threat of some kind? Isn't it a well-known dodge to clip the words of the message from a magazine?" Mr. Polkinghorn could see by their faces that this was not going down very well. "A flight of fancy, perhaps," he said hastily, "but after all, the man was hiding here, all alone, and for so long a time. How *did* he occupy himself?"

"Eating spaghetti," said Farley faintly.

"I'll tell you what he did by daylight," said Mr. Polkinghorn. "He read. And what did he read? He read some very highbrow, intellectual books. He read, for instance, *The Secret History of the American Revolution*. He read a large volume of *William James*. Also, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*."

"How do you know?"

"Why, there are six such books on the living-room table, all out of obvious gaps in the shelf." At this point Mr. Polkinghorn experienced a little bit of a qualm for he had never known and wouldn't have suspected that his neighbors owned, let alone read, books like these. But he threw the fleeting and somewhat chastening enlightenment away. "The next to the last clue," he pronounced, "is in the negative. It has to do with Arnold's clothing. Mr. Arnold is a large man. Now, we do not find any clothing here that pertains to the State Prison, except that cap. It seems likely that our prisoner would have changed his prison-made garments for a suit of Mr. Arnold's—*if he could have*. But he didn't."

"How do we know he didn't?" demanded Conners.

"Where are the clothes he would have discarded?" asked Mr. Polkinghorn triumphantly. "Now remember those descriptions. Cossetti was short: five foot five. Couldn't have worn Arnold's clothes. And by the same token neither could Sparrow, who was so terribly thin. Hoose

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probably could have worn them. But nobody did. It wasn't Hoose. Therefore." To pronounce the word "therefore" at the end of a chain of reasoning was Daniel Dean's trademark, and Mr. Polkinghorn used it with relish.

"How does it add up, again?" asked Conners, dubiously.

He's lost, thought Mr. Polkinghorn complacently; don't suppose he is a chess player.

"Ten points," the mystery writer recapitulated, glancing at his own neat handwriting where the points were listed in columns under the three names. "The sock for his one foot, the spaghetti for his Italian taste, the knots in the rope of neckties for his sailor's skill—these three point to Cossetti. But we must remember *against* Cossetti the fact that he, the sailor, might be the leader of the two unfortunates who stole, of all things, a boat."

"Listen," said Farley, rather apologetically, "they didn't *do* so good with the boat. Also, Cossetti was on a battleship, which is not quite the same thing."

"Now, the bourbon," Mr. Polkinghorn went on blithely, "does point faintly toward Hoose. But the clothing that has *not* been discarded here points clearly away from him and cancels out the bourbon. Whereas"—he rapped the table with his pencil—"the code message, the highbrow reading matter, the clipped magazines, the aspirin bottles, all point to Sparrow. And *this,*" he said complacently, "seems to me to settle it."

"What's that, sir?"

"This," said Mr. Polkinghorn, "comes from the green couch in the living room and is a gray hair. Hoose had red hair. Cossetti's was black. But Sparrow has gray hair." He leaned back, placing the pencil between his lips, and murmured, as Daniel Dean would have done, "Sparrow. Therefore."

The two plainsclothesmen looked uneasy—in fact, unconvinced. Farley had his brows way up and his lids way down and the stretched, blank flesh where the eyes should have been looked skeptical indeed. Conners was actually squirming. "I think I hear a car," he said. "Must be the Arnolds."

Mr. Polkinghorn sat at the kitchen table, rolling the pencil in his lips. Ah, well, he was thinking, I've told them so. Therefore I can always say I told you so. Of all glad words—he paraphrased—de dum de dum, the gladdest are—I told you so. Ah, well, he'd enjoyed his trifling exercise. One could always make a pleasant little article out of it and turn a penny, and, of course, nonfiction was the thing today.

Then Farley broke his dream by coming back into the kitchen with Mr. Arnold, who smiled and hailed him. "Hi, neighbor! Got *your* fancy brains to working on this crime, I hear."

"We'd like to know, sir . . ." Farley began.

"Don't ask *me,* Sergeant," said

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Mr. Arnold humorously. "Kitty's roaring through the house." They could, indeed, all hear rapid footsteps upstairs. "She and the kids will spot anything there is to spot. It's no use asking me. I just pay the rent around here." He sat down and lit a cigarette—a big careless easy-going man. Mr. Polkinghorn couldn't help knowing that Mr. Arnold wasn't shaken in the least by this affair. "Stranger than fiction, huh?" said Mr. Arnold genially. "Well, well . . ."

"I wonder," said Mr. Polkinghorn, with an easy smile, "whether you could tell us about the bottle of bourbon."

"I can't stand bourbon," said Arnold immediately.

"Then you did not empty that bottle?"

"Eh? Oh, that," said Arnold. "Forgot to put it out in the trash can, didn't I? Well, as I say, I can't stand bourbon, myself, but a chap from my office dropped by, the night before we left—to pick up the threads, you know, while I was gone. *He* likes bourbon, so I got rid of it on him. Why?"

Polkinghorn drew his pencil across his list, under Hoose.

"What is all this?" said Arnold.

But Mrs. Arnold now came bursting through the swinging door. She was a plump little person with a great mass of chestnut hair that was not very tidy. She wore a cotton dress with a sweater over it. She had a pack of envelopes in her hand. "Fine bunch of mail, Jim," she said to her husband, disgustedly. "It's 90 per cent bills, as far as I can see. Oh, hello, Mr. Polkinghorn." She gave him a museum-type look—she usually did—as if her prim, withdrawn, and solitary neighbor was a kind of exhibit. "I don't see a thing gone," she told the detectives, "except food. You say it was a criminal? Is *he* gone? Did you look in the cellar?"

"We looked, Ma'am," said Farley.

"None of your husband's *clothing* is missing?" asked Mr. Polkinghorn briskly, concerned with his little list.

"I don't think so," she said. "His blue suit is at the cleaner's. I asked them to hold it because he only needs that for business. What—?"

With a little confident smile, Mr. Polkinghorn was drawing a line across the name of Matthew Hoose.

"Sit down, Ma'am," said Farley, "if you don't mind, and let's talk about this a little bit."

"Right," said Conners, who had come in after her.

"Okay," she said. "I told Bobby to stay upstairs, but don't think he won't be listening behind the pantry door." She dropped the mail on the table and clasped her hands. "What can I tell you?"

"The thing is, we'd like to know *which* escaped convict was in here." Farley explained the little problem. "Now, Mr. Polkinghorn, he's got some ideas . . ."

"Busman's holiday? Ha, ha," boomed Mr. Arnold.

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Mr. Polkinghorn was frowning wisely at his notes. He spoke up in a businesslike voice. "First, I wish you would tell me if you can, what is the meaning of the rope of neckties?"

"What rope of neckties?" said Mr. Arnold, with a dropping jaw.

"The one under the dining-room table."

"Bobby tied Ginny to the stake the day it rained," said Mrs. Arnold pleasantly.

Her husband said, "With whose neckties?"

"Now, Jim, you said you wished somebody would take pity on your weakness. You know you can't resist your favorite old ties even though the cleaner simply does not get them really clean. You said yourself . . ."

"You gave 'em to Bob!"

"I couldn't find any rope and he *said* he wanted to practice for his merit badge . . ."

"Knots," said Farley. "Boy Scout, is he? Yeah."

"I guess that takes care of my complex about my favorite old ties," said Bob's father, resignedly. And then to Mr. Polkinghorn, "What about them?"

But Mr. Polkinghorn was making another pencil line, under Cossetti, this time. "The one unused sock in the living room?" he inquired.

"Oh," said Kitty Arnold in a minute, "you mean the *fourth* sock?"

"The *fourth* sock?" Mr. Polkinghorn had a brief vision of a four-legged man which he sternly dismissed.

"I made a rag doll for Ginny to take in the car, you know," she explained. "It takes three dime-store socks. *You* know." Mr. Polkinghorn *didn't* know—he'd never heard of such a thing! "So, of course, the fourth was just left over. But," she went on comfortingly, "if I'd had twelve socks and made four dolls, the way I did for the Bazaar, why, it would have come out even." She beamed at them.

Mr. Polkinghorn was crossing off the sock. He was thinking that Cossetti was fading out of the picture nicely, and he was not at all displeased. "Just to clear this away," he said, "tell me about those spaghetti cans."

"Do that," said Mr. Arnold. "Tell them, Kitty."

Kitty Arnold's plain face began to get pink.

"Seven cans," said Mr. Polkinghorn, "and all spaghetti. Is this what the man ate, would you say?"

"Well, no," she said, "I guess I *will* have to explain that. There was a church Supper—pot-luck, you know?" Mr. Polkinghorn *didn't* know. "There wasn't time," Mrs. Arnold continued. "We were packing to go away. So I took spaghetti for my contribution, but it wasn't homemade. I cheated," she confessed. "Oh, I threw in a little seasoning and nobody knew the difference . . ."

"She's just a fraud," said her hus-

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band lovingly. "At the Church, too. At least, in the basement." He chuckled.

Mrs. Arnold blushed deeper. "But the silliest thing was not to throw out all nine cans at once," she told them. "I guess I felt kind of guilty, I was afraid somebody might—well—notice. So I threw two out and washed the rest . . . they are perfectly clean. But I thought I'd get rid of them later, two at a time."

Mr. Arnold laughed heartily while Mr. Polkinghorn crossed off the third and last item under Cossetti and then his pencil came up and drew a line through that name. No logician on earth, Mr. Polkinghorn was thinking crossly, could have divined the real meaning of those spaghetti cans.

"What'd this man eat, then, Mrs. Arnold?" asked Farley.

"Meat, I guess," she said. "And bread. I had at least two loaves in the freezer and the chopped meat looks awful low to me."

"Listen," said Mr. Arnold, *"that* doesn't necessarily mean a thing. This family does away with one heck of a lot of hamburger."

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere with these points," said Conners, throwing an impatient glance toward Mr. Polkinghorn. "Suppose you tell us what else you know about this man, Mrs. Arnold."

"Oh, I'd say he slept in Bobby's bed and read all Bobby's comic books," said Mrs. Arnold promptly.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because the bed's so neat," she replied. "The corners are made hospital style which I never bother to do. And so is the stack of comic books neat—neater than Bobby Arnold ever piled them."

Mr. Polkinghorn shook his head, just slightly. It was almost a tremble. "May I go on, please?" he asked in Daniel Dean's most silken voice. "Tell me, please, why are bits clipped out of all those magazines?"

"Just Bobby," she said. "I never saw such a boy for 'sending away' for things."

"Natural born sucker for coupons," said Mr. Arnold.

"And Ginny collects rabbits," said Mrs. Arnold. *"Pictures* of rabbits, that is. Ever since Easter. *Nothing's* safe."

Mr. Polkinghorn's head had begun to swim—quite perceptibly. But he reminded himself, that his point about the clippings had really been very far-fetched. He drew a line through it, and pressed on. "Those aspirin bottles in the living room? Who put them there?"

"Jeepers," said Kitty Arnold, casting her eyes down, "You are sure going to think I'm an awful sloppy housekeeper, Mr. Polkinghorn."

"You put them there?" Mr. Polkinghorn began to feel a real alarm.

"They're Jim's," she said. "He had the grippe a couple of weeks ago and nothing would do . . . *he* wasn't going to stay upstairs in his bed and miss television. So he languished in there on the living-room

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couch. And I never did get around to throwing out those bottles. There's an awful lot to keep throwing out around here. But why do you ask?"

Nobody answered. Mr. Polkinghorn marked the aspirin bottles off his list and then he raised the pencil and crossed off the clue of the gray hair, too. His neighbor, Jim Arnold, had a head of pepper-and-salt and there just was no reliable significance in . . . He looked with some dismay on the case for or against the man, Sparrow. There were only two points left. Two, out of them all. And nobody was speaking. Were the policemen embarrassed for him? He lifted his head and drove hard with the one point he had felt most certain about.

"Well," he said with just the faintest sneer, "if our friend was upstairs reading comic books, who took out and read those six rather scholarly volumes on the living-room table?"

Mrs. Arnold began to giggle. "Well," she said, controlling herself so that the giggles changed to mere dimples in her plump cheeks, "nobody was *reading* them, Mr. Polkinghorn. That is, not recently. You see . . ." She must have divined the chagrin Mr. Polkinghorn was feeling because she began to sound soothing. "If you knew the family better, Mr. Polkinghorn, and some of our habits . . . but then no stranger could. We have a little projector for throwing transparencies on the wall. Jim was showing some of them to the man from his office. The table's just too low," she said. "It takes those six thick books under the projector . . ."

"I . . . see," said Mr. Polkinghorn, struggling not to seem as disgruntled as he was. Daniel Dean, *himself,* couldn't have guessed there had been a projector! Impossible! "I suppose *this* is perfectly clear to you, too?" he said bitterly, and tossed her the last clue of all, the bit of paper with the mysterious symbols on it.

"This?" she said in a wondering tone. "Now where in the world did you find that?"

"Under a chair," he said, gloomily.

"It's an old one," she said.

"An old *what,* Mrs. Arnold?" said Farley gently.

"What *is* it?" She looked at it closely. "Tomatoes, mayonnaise, lettuce, Idaho potatoes, butter, asparagus, sandwich bags," she read off glibly. "Why, it's a grocery list, of course. When did we have asparagus, Jim, and baked potat . . . ?"

"Never mind." Mr. Polkinghorn folded his list. He didn't care to throw it away in this house. He thought she might giggle. Her husband might guffaw. He thought, crossly, the whole affair would make good fiction, at least. His clues *should* have meant something. If these people didn't live in such a ridiculous giddy human kind of way. . . .

"So," said Farley thoughtfully, "we know nothing about this guy but that he reads comic books."

"Who," said Mr. Polkinghorn bitterly, "doesn't?"

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Mrs. Arnold sensed that here was some wound she didn't fully understand. She had tact. She busied her fingers with the envelopes on the table before her. "Jim," she said suddenly and indignantly, "that darned telephone company has done it again! We don't know anybody in Paris, Kentucky, to call Long Distance."

"What!" said Farley. "Lemme me."

"If you'll excuse me," said Mr. Polkinghorn with a really gruesome smile. He went out the kitchen door and through the hedge and back to his sane, neat, lonely house.

It was the younger one, Farley, who came around the next day to talk to Mr. Polkinghorn. "Thought you might like to know the upshot," he said kindly. "It was Matthew Hoose, all right. He's just a big dumb wild kid. Went along for the escape because it seemed a good idea at the time. Didn't like the company he had. So they parted. He found the Arnold house and read on the back door how long it would be empty. So he goes right in, the night of the thirty-first, and calls up his mother back in Paris, Kentucky, and asks her for some money. Says he's no thief. All he took was the meat and the bread. So his mother *mailed* him the money. That's why he was watching for the mailman. He knew it was his last day there and he was getting anxious. Oh, they picked him up. Sure. Easy. In the railroad station. He's not," said Farley gently, "so terribly bright. Although the army did manage to teach him how to make a bed."

"It was kind of you to come," said Mr. Polkinghorn graciously. "Thank you very much."

"Maybe life's *not* quite so strange as fiction," murmured Farley and he smiled his nice smile.

"For my part," said Mr. Polkinghorn stiffly, "I think the old saw holds."

He went back to his work table. He was plotting a new one for Daniel Dean. His glazed eye looked out of the window. After a moment, it began to see.

Mrs. Arnold was making for her car with two henna-colored blankets over her shoulder. Bobby trailed after with both hands held together as if some precious thing were within the cup they made. Mr. Polkinghorn saw the mother glance into the cup of the boy's hands and nod and smile. The little girl, Ginny, was trailing a long white string after her on the grass. There was nothing on the end of the string. They all got into the car. Ginny sat on the two blankets. The boy had had nothing in his hands because now he was clapping them in a gay and jerky rhythm.

Mr. Polkinghorn sighed. He looked back at the paper and put a dainty little check mark on one of his notes. *Murderer must be ambidexterous.*

As for his neighbors, they were to him then and would remain forever an impenetrable mystery.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL INNES**
TITLE:	***The Magic Painting***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Assistant Commissioner Appleby
LOCALE:	Fray Manor, Fen Country, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Many cases are mysterious — but only rarely does one encounter a moment of pure mystery. Yes, there is a difference — as this charming tale reveals . . . a magic reminiscence.*

THE ARCHDEACON HAD TOLD US A ghost story, and as the polite murmurs of interest and appreciation died away our hostess threw a log on the fire. It was quite a small log, but nevertheless the action committed us to another sleepy, even if tolerably comfortable, half hour. And this prompted one of the younger people to a question the precise phrasing of which was perhaps a shade lacking in tact. "And now," she asked, "couldn't we have an exciting one?"

"A mystery story," another girl said. "A murder in a sealed room, and then some frightfully cunning detection, and all ending in a terribly thrilling chase."

"That is just what Sir John could give us." Our hostess turned to Appleby. "You wouldn't be so unkind as to refuse?"

For a moment the Assistant Commissioner was silent, so that I wondered whether he was going to contrive some polite excuse. A long career at Scotland Yard had provided him with plenty of exciting material, and there had been occasions on which I had known him come out with it forthrightly enough. But he had rather old-fashioned ideas on what was suitable for mixed company. So I wasn't too surprised by his words when presently he did speak.

"Do you know, I'm afraid that positively nothing in the murderous way comes into my head? But an

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affair that had its moment of mystery — well, I think I can manage that."

"Only a moment of it?" The girl who had asked for excitement was reproachful.

Appleby shook his head. "Oh, what I shall tell you was abundantly mysterious. But mystery, you know, is another matter. One is lucky ever to get a glimpse of it." Appleby paused, and it was plain that he spoke seriously. Then he told us his tale . . .

"Henry and Elizabeth Fray were old friends of my wife's family, and for some years we used to spend a week with them just before Christmas. The party would be rather like this one, and the house was similar, too — which is no doubt what put the incident I am going to describe into my mind. Fray Manor rambled in an easy, unassuming fashion over a good deal of ground and back through several centuries. The oldest bit was undoubtedly at the top. You may judge that to be a good mysterious touch at the start, although I hasten to add that it has no particular relevance for my story.

"Well then, at the top of the house was a fine late-Elizabethan Long Gallery, with a magnificent view through high, gray-mullioned windows. Not your sort of view, though. Fray Manor is in the Fen Country; and the house looks out over level fields stretching to the horizon, with here and there a canal or windmill or church tower, and everywhere an enormous sky.

"But there was another particular in which the scene at Fray isn't to be compared with this." And here Appleby turned to our hostess with a smile. "Neither Henry nor Elizabeth had the sort of grasp you and Hugh possess of family history — and particularly of family possessions. I don't mean that they were indifferent to Henry's inheritance — far from it. But they were vague, and rather took for granted that for all future time Fray Manor would be the same. In point of fact, there were ominous signs that Henry and Elizabeth were mistaken, and the family fortunes were altogether shakier than they realized.

"I used to doubt whether their small son, Robin, would much mend matters. For Robin too was vague — although in what might be called a potentially more distinguished way. He was a shy child, but with some hidden flame in him — of passion, of imagination? — one couldn't tell what. Certainly he was more likely to add something to the ideal than to the practical world. I'm afraid that I can't describe him better than that — which is a pity, since my story turns on him."

"Robin Fray is its hero?" The Archdeacon asked this.

Appleby nodded. "Yes. Not, I'm glad to say, the tragic hero. Although, in a sense, it was a near thing . . . I don't need to tell you much about the house party. It wasn't large, and we nearly all were friends of long standing. But there were three exceptions. Miss Shipley was an elderly

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woman who painted dogs, and Henry Fray's admiration for this accomplishment was so great that he had made Elizabeth invite her to visit, pretty much out of the blue. Then there was a fellow called Habgood, who appeared to do free-lance articles on country houses for the magazines. Finally, and in rather a different category, there was an American cousin, Charles Fray.

"The actual cousinship must have been extremely remote, since the American branch of the family had been established in New England for many generations. But I was amused to notice that Charles knew far more about the family history than Henry. Not that Charles obtruded his knowledge. He was an observant, rather diffident bachelor. It was with some surprise that I gathered he was a highly successful business executive and extremely wealthy. He was due to conclude his stay a couple of days after my own arrival. I was sorry about this, because he seemed to me a thoroughly fine fellow.

"I've mentioned the Long Gallery. We had tea there on the last afternoon of Charles Fray's visit, and it happened that he and I made a little tour of inspection of the paintings lining one side of the place. There were a great many of them, although if older Frays had ever had any luck on their continental wanderings, and brought home a Titian or a Rubens, it had long since gone to the sale room. But there is often a mild charm in a collection of mediocre pictures that have collected over the centuries in that sort of house, and my American acquaintance was clearly delighted with this record of his English relatives' artistic tastes.

"There was one painting in particular that he paused in front of. For some moments I couldn't see why. It was a small autumnal landscape with figures, executed in the Flemish taste of the late Sixteenth Century, which would have been pleasing enough if the quality of the painting hadn't been rather notably poor. What was represented was a bleak, level scene, with a windmill in the middle distance and the towers of a tiny town closing the horizon. In the foreground was the gable of a house, with an attic window out of which a small boy was gazing rather disconsolately at the prospect. I had just taken this in when Charles Fray touched my arm and pointed across the Gallery. I saw his point. There, through the large Tudor window, was an actual landscape very much like the painted one we had been glancing at. It was possible to guess at once what had prompted some bygone Fray to make this particular purchase. But that, at the moment, wasn't all. At the real window our small friend Robin was himself gazing rather wistfully out over the bare fields. He and the boy in the picture, one could feel, were both longing for a gorgeous fall of snow."

Appleby paused on this. The Archdeacon, whose successfully accomplished ghost story gave him the

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status of a performer who had retired into the wings, judged it proper to offer a word of encouragement. "A pleasing incident," he said. "It makes a picture in itself."

"No doubt. But it was then handled a shade heavily — chiefly by Miss Shipley, the woman who painted dogs. She came up at that moment, and I pointed out the similarity that had attracted us. She brought it into general notice, and even teased Robin a little. She asked him if he knew that the painting was a magic painting, and that it would never, never snow again outside until it had snowed in the painting first. It would have been difficult to tell what Robin made of this. I thought Charles Fray looked a little startled, and that at the same time he was watching the child curiously. Then he turned the conversation by asking Henry whether he knew anything about the origin of the Flemish painting.

"But Henry, of course, was as vague as usual. He had once been told some story about it, which had entirely gone out of his head. He did remember that when his father died there had been some reason for having it specially looked at by the fellow who came down and appraised everything. It hadn't proved to be worth much.

"Habgood, the guest who went round writing up country houses, took a hand at this point. That is to say, he peered at the painting with a good deal of curiosity, and then rather baldly remarked that its owner was certainly right, and that artistically it was worthless. I believe Henry was rather nettled; probably he liked the thing just because it had a smack of his own familiar landscape; and the incident was closed by some other guest having the good sense to cause a diversion.

"The next morning Charles Fray took his departure. I remember him looking up at the sky as he prepared to step into his car, and saying — in rather a whimsical tone — something about snow coming soon. It was true that that great sky appeared heavy with it. But certainly not a flake had fallen.

"And now I come to the sudden crisis of the affair. What remained of the party was gathered in the drawing-room shortly after lunch when Robin burst in upon us like a little madman. 'It's come!' he shouted. 'It's come, it's come, it's come!' His eyes were blazing, and as he stared at us it happened that for a second I met his gaze directly. You remember my saying that there was a moment not simply of the mysterious, but of pure mystery, in the business? Well, this was it. The boy had met a mystery. He had met the real thing. And he was exalted.

"But now his mother was pulling him up — gently enough, but decidedly. 'Robin dear, don't be so noisy. And what has come?'

" 'The snow. It's come, I tell you!' I think we all turned and looked through the window. The sky was more leaden than ever — but still no

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snow was falling. And suddenly the boy laughed — quite wildly. 'Sillies!' he shouted. 'Dear old sillies! Not outside. In the picture. Don't you remember? It *has* to be in the picture — *first*.'

"There was an awkward silence. Some of us, I imagine, supposed the child to be delirious, and the more obtuse may have concluded that it was all some sort of impertinent joke. I could see Robin's parents exchange an alarmed glance. They were simple souls, remember, and probably regarded their boy as being at best quite dangerously dreamy and fanciful.

"Habgood was the first person to produce what looked like a sensible reaction. 'Do you suppose,' he said, 'that somebody may have been perpetrating a trick up there? I'll go and see.' And then he turned to Robin. 'There's often a good deal of magic in pictures, you know. But it doesn't always last.' He gave the boy a kindly pat on the shoulder, and left the room.

"For some seconds we were all silent. Then somebody gave a little involuntary exclamation and pointed to the window. The first flakes were coming down."

Our hostess gave a deft kick at her small log, and flame flickered up around it. "I hope," she said, "there *was* magic in the picture."

Appleby nodded. "I was hoping so, too. And I was in possession, you know, of an important piece of evidence."

"Evidence?"

"Just that single glance of the boy's. To a policeman, a wink — or call it the absolute absence of one — ought to be as good as a nod, any day. Somehow it suddenly struck me that we'd all better follow Habgood up to the Long Gallery. I said so, pretty vigorously — and then led the way, with Robin's hand in mine.

"As we mounted the final flight of stairs we met Habgood coming down. He glanced at the boy, and for a moment he just didn't appear to know what to say. It was uncomfortable, as you may guess. And then he found what wasn't a bad tone — light, but not in the least condescending or facetious. 'It's gone, Robin. It's gone, just as it came.'

"The boy said nothing, but I felt his hand tremble, and I saw that he had gone very pale. Suddenly he gave a tug; I let him go; and he ran to the far end of the Gallery where the picture hung. By the time he got to the end of that long vista, he looked quite comically — or tragically — small.

"When we caught up with him he was very still, gazing at the familiar, the mediocre, the untransformed autumnal painting — hanging as it had always hung on the known, predictable wall. He seemed to have no disposition to cry, and for a moment nobody had anything to say. Then some worthy woman began talking nervously to Elizabeth Fray about tricks of light, and what a charming fancy of Robin's it had been. Outside, the snow was still falling.

"I looked at the little painting, and

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suddenly I was quite sure that there should indeed be snow there too. This wasn't entirely intuition. I had, in fact, been doing my best to think. And now I asked Henry to close the doors at both ends of the Gallery, and to let nobody out. Then I searched the place — pretty grimly, for I had a notion that, so far as the boy's confidence in this universe was concerned, rather a lot depended on it. Of course there hadn't been time to find a really clever hiding place. Within half an hour, Robin had his snow scene in his hands."

The girl who had wanted a sealed room and a thrilling chase cried out delightedly at this. "Really and truly?"

Appleby smiled at her. "Really and truly. There it was: the same landscape, the same attic window, the same small boy. But everywhere, snow. And such snow! Teniers couldn't have done it. Nor could he have done the figures with which the small landscape was peopled. Against that snow their life was miraculous. What Robin Fray held was, in its minor way, a masterpiece. Which is what, from the elder Breughel, you might expect."

Appleby paused. "Explanations? Well, not many are needed. What had prompted Miss Shipley to her joke about the picture being transformed into a snow scene? The unconscious memory of a bit of art history gathered in her student days. What had sent Habgood, the only man with any sort of connoisseurship, to the Long Gallery, before anybody else could check up on Robin's apparently fantastic story? Fuller knowledge of the same bit of history. That was as much as I could obscurely guess while the episode was taking place. Now I can add what I discovered later.

"Breughel is believed to have painted four companion pictures: an identical scene, but at the four seasons of the year. *Spring* and *Summer* are known to survive — the first in Hungary and the second in a public collection in New York. Long ago, a Fray came into possession of *Autumn*. But his grandson — it was long before a Pieter Breughel was accounted very valuable — gave it away to a friend who fancied it, but first caused a mediocre copy to be made by an itinerant painter from the Low Countries. No doubt he wanted some record of a landscape that in a small way recalled his own estate. Later still, the original *Autumn* perished in a fire. The copy that remained at Fray Manor had, of course, no more than historical interest; nobody would give more than a few pounds for it at the most.

"The fourth painting, *Winter*, had long been thought to have perished. But Charles Fray, who was a collector, had run it to earth somewhere. Knowing that the English Frays had once owned the original *Autumn*, he brought *Winter* with him on his visit, intending it as a parting gift — a princely gift — to his kinsman and to the home of his ancestors. Miss Shipley's joke prompted him to sub-

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stitute it for the old copy of *Autumn* just before leaving. The old copy of *Autumn* itself he simply left leaning against the wall. The situation, he supposed, would thus at once explain itself, and at the same time give little Robin some amusement.

"So you see what happened. As soon as Robin tumbled in on us with his story, Habgood realized that *Winter* had turned up — and that if he could make off with it when only Robin had seen it, the boy would simply be disbelieved. Things might, of course, go wrong if Charles Fray made inquiries later. But if Charles got no acknowledgement of his gift from his English kinsman he might even remain silent; and if *Winter* was subsequently heard of on the market he would presume that Henry was behind the sale. Habgood was astute."

Our hostess considered. "But not at all nice. What happened to *Winter*?"

"It hangs in Robin Fray's bedroom now. And I don't think he'll ever have to sell it. The benevolent transatlantic cousin, still a bachelor, has been around again, and it looks as if Robin is going to be his heir."

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RIDE WITH A KILLER

by VERNE ATHANAS

THE COACH PASSED BARRON'S without stopping, as the driver in the high seat up front racketed out a volley with the silk popper of his long whip. Danny McClellan rode backward, facing Merle Workman, and Danny was getting tired of looking at Merle.

Merle Workman didn't look like what he was, unless you scanned his face very closely. His eyes were a chilly light color that left you uncertain as to whether they were gray or blue, and few men cared to look directly into them long enough to satisfy themselves about it. Danny knew him very well, and he didn't like him, but there wasn't much he could do about that when he had to work with the man. *Under him, you mean,* Danny reminded himself wryly, and that made this job a narrow wire to walk.

Workman wouldn't know about that, of course, because the company handled Workman with kid gloves, but Danny had his orders; very circumspect, very delicate: "Not real authority, you understand, McClellan, but well, you understand, Workman is as fine an agent as the company ever had, but he tends to be a bit impetuous. An agent is in a risky position; we understand that. A man must protect himself, but two of you should be able to bring in this man Hanseldt without any trouble. You understand?"

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The coach reached the top of a knoll, and Danny looked back at the valley they'd passed, looked back at Barron's white house and a willow fringed creek, with the Siskiyous looming beyond and Pilot Rock like a blunt thumb indicating the way to heaven.

It was a beautiful view, and much easier to look at than Merle Workman. Danny understood, all right. Cut out the pussyfooting, and it boiled down to a mean situation. Workman was the boss—senior to Danny in years and experience. Call a spade a spade; Workman was a killer; but he was a man the express company couldn't afford to lose—and Danny was supposed to keep him from killing without offending him. I wonder, thought Danny, half grimly, half humorously, if I ought to give him a little talk about flushing his birds before he fires.

They stopped in Ashland Mills just long enough to change horses, and then bowled smoothly along the improved road that flanked Bear Creek; and still Merle Workman sat without moving, as he had all the way now, not talking, just flicking Danny occasionally with those cold eyes, not even bothering to answer the few questions of the granger who sat beside him. Then, a few miles past Phoenix, Workman looked quickly at Danny and then back outside as the brakes squealed and the coach slewed to the sudden braking. The granger whipped off his hat and thrust his head out the window. "Rig broke down ahead," he said. Only Danny caught the subtle loosening of Merle Workman's shoulders.

The coach stopped, and Danny looked out. The rig was a light buggy, and a woman stood beside it. The hem of her full skirt was dusty, and so were her hands. The buggy sagged despondently, and a rear wheel lay in the road beside it.

The woman looked up at the driver's seat of the coach with a vexed smile and said, "The spindle nut is lost completely, Ben. I've looked all around and down the road."

"Why, now," said the coach driver, "that's too bad." The coach rocked as he started to climb down. "I've got a spare nut, but I doubt it'll fit that axle spindle."

The granger unlatched the door and got out, and as Danny started to move, glad of the chance to escape the confinement of the coach, Workman's pale eyes silently commanded him to bide and let be, and the resentful perversity inside Danny said silently, "Go to hell!" and he stepped out.

The driver got a heavy iron nut from the toolbox and tried it. It slipped over the threaded spindle-end without catching on the screw threads.

"Afraid I'll have to send somebody after the rig, Miss Emily," the driver said regretfully.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" the girl said.

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Even in her displeasure, she had a pleasant voice, and Danny looked at her, frankly appraising.

She was fairly tall for a girl, not much more than half a head shorter than Danny himself, with blonde hair under her plain bonnet, a trim figure, and a handsome face that escaped mere prettiness. She had pushed her sleeves up to rake in the dust for the missing nut, and her expression was more considering than helpless as she looked from the coach driver to the crippled buggy.

Danny said suddenly to the driver, "You got some soft wire in that box?"

"Yes, but—" the driver said, impatiently aware of his lateness.

"Get it," said Danny. He walked to the buggy and lifted up on the box bed. The granger got the wheel and slid it onto the axle and held it straight as Danny let the weight back on it. Danny slid the oversize nut over the spindle against the hub bushing, took the coil of wire from the driver, and rove two layers of it about the threads, pulled an end through the cotter-pin slot, and twisted the ends. He shook the wheel, grasping it by tire and felly, and said cheerfully, "A rawhider's make-do, but it ought to hold."

The girl smiled her thanks at Danny, and the driver turned back toward the coach. But the granger said, "Looks a little shaky. Be a shame to have it leave you stranded again, Miss Emily."

Danny saw the chance and said, "I can drive her on in to town. Leave the rest of that wire, just in case."

The driver turned back, instinctively scanning him with the suspicion of the local man for the stranger. He said uncomfortably, as if he would bear responsibility in case of any wrong, "I don't know—"

The granger, a more open and friendly man, said, "Why not? I'd be glad to stand by myself, Miss Emily, only I'm being met at Jasonville."

The girl looked at Danny closely then, not suspicious but careful, and then she smiled her thanks. "If you're sure it will be no trouble," she said.

"None at all," said Danny, and the driver, with an air of washing his hands of it all, turned away, saying, "Load up! Late now."

Danny reached into the coach for his luggage—a worn canvas bag with a puckering cord in the neck. Workman said nothing. He wouldn't show anger or displeasure openly, Danny knew, but he also knew that the man was furious. The small spurning gesture of Workman's foot as he nudged the duffel bag at Danny said enough. Danny gave it right back with a faint unoffended grin and a murmured, "Thanks." And he thought, with a little relief: Anyone will be better company than that.

He noticed that the girl climbed to the seat unassisted while he

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hitched the horse back into the shafts. No nonsense, he said to himself. Wonder what you'd think if you knew I'd choose your company to Workman's even if you were fat and fifty and had a wart on your nose as big as my thumb? Then he had the grace to grin inwardly and acknowledge: But she isn't and she hasn't, so see can you bear up under it.

He watched the wheel for a while, then, satisfied it would hold, said, "Didn't have a chance for introductions. My name is Danny McClellan."

She said, "I'm Emily Hanseldt," and they bobbed their heads formally at each other, she not offering to shake hands, and then a sudden cold panicky shiver touched Danny's spine. He looked away and tried to ask casually, "Live in Jasonville, your family?"

"I do," she said. "I've just got a brother."

The cold, crawling snake looped around his ribs and made it difficult to breathe. He struggled to keep his voice on the verge of disinterest. "Knew some Hanseldts in California," he lied. "Any relation?"

"No," she said consideringly, "I think not. I think we're the only ones in this part of the country."

That did it. A sour, cursing anger came up inside him, and a bitter, sardonic laughter at himself for his eagerness to escape Workman and ride with this girl. He had a sudden overwhelming wish that he had never seen her; but that was foolish. His thoughts gibed at him maliciously: How do you make small talk in a case like this—tip your hat and tell her you're after her brother?

The four miles or so to Jasonville were sheer misery. He was grateful that the girl didn't talk much. But he knew he was being almost rudely abrupt when he let her off at the Square Deal wagon shop, touched his hat, and tramped away. He thought bitterly of Workman: Maybe the ice-water devil is right. Oh, Danny boy, that was close!

Jasonville wasn't particularly prepossessing; he'd seen a dozen such slammed-together boom towns, and one sweeping glance took in most of it. He got a room at the Robinson Hotel, and saw Workman's scrawl a few lines above his own in the registration book; Workman had registered as Merle W. Carter, of Sacramento. Danny signed his own name and San Francisco, dumped his bag in the room, and went back to the street.

Workman was at the bar of a saloon a few doors up, talking affably enough with a man in a store suit and beaver hat, the two men looking alike as brothers, both plump and neat and obviously prosperous with the kind of prosperity that comes from other men's work.

He'd be the picture of a promoter or a saloonkeeper, thought Danny, if you didn't know about those two sawed-off .44s under his vest.

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Workman's chilly killer's eyes turned on Danny the moment he pushed into the room, and then went back to the man he was talking to. Danny bought a drink and nursed it, not going any closer, and waited until Workman finally broke off and moved toward the door. Workman stopped in the doorway just an instant, and in a moment Danny followed.

Workman was waiting for him in the darkness of Oregon Street, and he said, with icy venom, "Don't you ever get tired of playing the fool?"

Danny held his temper and said, with forced lightness, "How old do you have to be before it turns into foolishness?"

"You're a fool at any age when you let a woman interfere with a job."

It was too good to pass up. Danny let his own inner sourness come out in a soft, "But that wasn't just any woman, Merle. That was Hanseldt's sister."

Merle Workman's neat little hand shot out and fastened on Danny's shirt front. Workman's face was up close to Danny's. "Oh, you driveling idiot!" he said.

Danny hacked with the edge of his hand and snapped Workman's hand roughly from its grip. "Don't put your hands on me, Merle," he said. "And don't call me names unless you want to follow it up."

"All right, Danny," Workman said. He did not apologize. He went on in his normal dry, careful voice, "He isn't in town. I'll have to go after him."

Danny was alarmed by something in Workman's voice. He said carefully, "We've got no authority in this county till the sheriff honors our letter."

"Your job," Workman said promptly. Again there was the faintest thread of—what? Triumph, perhaps—in his almost inflectionless voice. "The sheriff isn't in town either, Danny," he added. "You see him and give him the letter and I'll locate our man."

"All right," Danny said reluctantly. He couldn't insist without tipping Workman off about why he'd been sent along but he had to do what he could, and he made it as casual as possible. "Be sure, Merle. Be sure he's the one we want."

Workman said quietly, as he turned away, "I don't make mistakes, Danny."

Danny said, with a little edge in his voice, "Just be damned sure, that's all, Merle."

Workman did not answer. But in a moment, a soft sound came; what might have been an amused chuckle in another man.

"You hear me?" Danny said almost harshly.

"I heard you."

The hotel dining room was full, and a dozen men waited a chance at the tables. Danny was hungry, and he went up the street, looking for an eating house, and turned in

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at the first one where he saw a vacant stool. He didn't see the girl until she stopped before him on the other side of the counter and said matter-of-factly, "Hello again. What will it be?"

There was a sort of nasty fascination to this whole thing, Danny thought. He knew enough to keep his nose clean. You didn't go digging around the edges of a job like this. It was better if you didn't know the kin and friends and hangers-on. Find your man, do your job, get it over. Go on to the next one and forget it. That's what you got paid for. But somehow this job wasn't shaping up like the others. "What have you got?" he asked.

"Steak, stew, or roast beef. Potatoes, beans, coffee, apple pie."

"Good. Steak, potatoes, and coffee. And a big piece of the pie."

She brought him the coffee first, without asking, then disappeared through a door at the end of the counter. It was a good steak, and he got the beans on the side, too, not dried boiled beans but fresh tender snap beans, green and savory, with diced bacon. Danny ate hungrily.

Some of the diners finished, and others came in. One of them was a little drunk, and he called the girl "Honey" when she took his order. He looked up at her with a simper when she served him, and he reached out to squeeze her hand as she set down the little side dish of green beans. Danny carefully laid down his knife and fork.

He picked them up again just as carefully. The drunk screamed like a woman and slapped futilely at his drenched and scalded arm, and the girl calmly set the heavy coffeepot back on its kerosene flame on the back counter. She did not even look at the man as he stared with suddenly sobered eyes at her back.

To Danny she said calmly, "More coffee?"

He looked up sharply, then grinned and said, "Thanks," and added hastily, "In my cup, please."

She smiled briefly and said, as she poured carefully, "Some of them have to learn the hard way."

He thought: So we both know that, too. Aloud, he said, "What do I owe you?"

"You did me a favor," she said. "Let's just say we're even."

He said, more brusquely than he intended, "Forget that. What do I owe you?"

"All right. Twenty cents," she said.

He laid a quarter dollar on the counter. "You forgot the pie."

She made change and pushed a nickel back to him. "It's part of the dinner."

"Then I'll buy another cup of coffee," he said. He knew he was being foolish, and suddenly didn't care. He drank coffee he didn't want, and found himself the last customer in the place. He should have gone, then, but he found himself asking idly, "You work here all the time?"

"It's my place. I own it."

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That piqued his curiosity, and the casual question came automatically, for idle questions sometimes brought surprising answers.

"You've got a brother, you said?"

"Yes."

No defensiveness, no apology—and no further explanation. Danny waited, but apparently she wasn't going to say anything more. He finished his coffee, and, as he stood to go, she came around the counter undoing her apron strings, and followed him to the door.

He said, "I didn't mean to keep you late."

"It's just closing time," she said, as if she meant it. He went out, and she said, behind him, "Good night," and then he turned back and said, "Can I see you home?"

She looked at him closely. Suddenly, a yell sounded down the street. Past the hotel, someone fired a shot and whooped gleefully. She had already started to shake her head, and he tilted his head at the sound and said simply, "Just in case, is all."

She smiled then, and nodded. "Just a moment, until I get the cash drawer and my coat," she said.

He waited outside until she came. She carried a little canvas sack in one hand, and he asked, "You take your cash home with you every night?"

She gestured at the huddled street of flimsy frame buildings. "One tossed match," she said, "and half the town would go like powder."

"Hadn't thought," he said.

They walked companionably enough, not speaking. They turned at California and walked a block and a half in the darkness until she said quietly, "This is it. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said as quietly, and stood in the dirt street until he heard her door open and close. Then he went back to the hotel.

He did not see Workman that night or the next day. He had the certain, dismal knowledge then that he wouldn't see him until Workman came to him. The killer wolf was on the trail, and there was nothing he could do about it now.

In Danny's trade, anything done three times hand running was almost ingrained habit. Danny ate at Emily Hanseldt's place every day. In three days there was no question about his walking her home after she closed up. In three days they were Emily and Danny, and they still walked companionably, neither confiding nor confided in, neither objecting nor requesting more than this casual relationship.

The fourth night, Danny waited until he heard her door close behind her, and then walked his usual slow stroll back to the hotel, debating whether to hunt up a game or go to bed, and decided on bed. He knew the moment he touched the knob to his door that Workman was in the room.

Danny wasn't sure how he knew. That was something that had come

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with his trade, in time. He knew the moment he touched the knob, and he said softly, "Coming in, Merle," so that Workman could hear his voice, and then he went on into the dark room and closed the door.

Workman said, "Danny," without question or surprise, and lighted a match and touched it to the lamp-wick. He put the chimney back in its brackets, standing with his back to Danny, and Danny thought desperately: He's done it; he's caught him and killed him. And then Workman turned without looking directly at him and said, "He's a roamer. Rock Point, Grave Creek, Steamboat Creek, Applegate. He moves around."

Workman turned back to fiddle with the lamp; and Danny thought savagely: Damn you, quit playing with me!

Then Workman said in his dry, matter-of-fact voice, "You've seen the sheriff?"

Danny said slowly, carefully watching Workman's face, "Yes. He honored the letter." He took the folded paper from his pocket and shook out the two deputy's badges.

"Good," Workman said heartily. "Good. Now we get down to business." He put out a hand, and Danny gave him one of the badges and Workman grinned his thin, malicious grin and flipped the emblem in the air like a coin. "Let's go," he said.

Danny looked down at the badge in his own hand and, for perhaps the fiftieth time in four days, he asked himself how he'd got started at this business. And for the fiftieth time, he had no sure answer. Maybe it was the streak of wildness he'd had from the day he walked; a way he had of waking to each day with a little tingle of excitement as if this were the day something really big was going to happen. It hadn't happened at home, and he had simply walked off one day when he was fifteen years old. It hadn't happened when he rode after another man's cattle for money, either, and he'd drifted in and out of a lot of strange places since. He was quick and tough and almost nerveless by the time he'd served his apprenticeships in other trades, and this was the first time he'd really felt reluctance.

Without his really thinking about them, the words came out, "Merle, don't take this one all the way."

Workman said, without emphasis or malice, "Just because you've been squiring his sister every night since I left. I told you not to be a fool, Danny."

Danny said bitterly, "Forget that. All I ask is—"

"He'll have his chance," Workman said tonelessly.

"That I know," said Danny. "You'll make his chance. You'll blind him with that smooth face of yours, and you'll turn your back on him and he'll make a break and then you'll kill him."

"I never drew first on a man in my life," Workman said. His eyes, as

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colorless as two chips of ice, were blank and unrevealing. "Don't say something you'll regret, Danny."

There was no mercy in the man, Danny knew, and he knew now that Workman had his mind made up.

Danny sighed, a slow, regretful, resigned sound. He dropped the badge in his pocket. He drew his gun and clicked the cylinder around, inspecting the bright brass caps on the nipples. Then he cocked the gun, leveled it, and said in a perfectly flat, emotionless voice, "Put your hands behind your head, Merle." He made his voice quiet, but inside him a vaulting excitement began to rise.

Merle Workman did not curse or cry out. A faint match-flame of light began to show behind the polished chips of ice in his eye sockets. He raised his hands slowly and locked his fingers behind his head.

Danny said softly, "I'm taking your pistols, Merle." He almost pulled the trigger then, for that was the moment. The light blazed in Workman's pale eyes, and the faint movement of automatic protest started. Then the light dulled, and Danny reached out with his left hand, flipped up the points of Workman's vest, and got the two .44s with rammer and linkage removed complete and the barrels cut down to three inches. He did not touch him otherwise, or let his own pistol come within arm's length of Workman's body.

"All right, Merle," he said. "Now we'll go.

Workman said, almost pleadingly, "Danny—"

"Let's go," Danny said, and they went down to get the horses that Workman had ready.

As they rode into the darkness, Merle said quietly, "I don't have to show you where he is, Danny."

"You'll show me," said Danny. They rode through the ghostly mystery of the timbered canyons, south and a little east. The two .44s gouged at Danny's belly where he'd thrust them out of the way under his belt, and he began to wish he'd left them behind. The moon came up, high and cold and not quite fully round, and Merle Workman said, "He's killed a man, Danny. He shot Jimmy Doyle out of the seat when he got the express box. Jimmy was a friend of mine."

"You never had a friend in your life," Danny said flatly.

They came to a stream, and the horses drank. "How much farther?" Danny asked.

"Over the next ridge," Workman said tonelessly. "Now give me my pistols, Danny. You've carried this foolishness far enough."

"We'll do this one my way," Danny said. "I got no orders to kill him."

Workman said disgustedly, "Damn it, don't preach me a sermon, Danny!"

"I'm not preaching," Danny said. "I'm telling you. I know how you've made your reputation, Merle. Why do you suppose the express company

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sent me along with you on this one? You've brought in too many dead ones."

Workman said, almost mildly, "I don't believe that. Besides, I couldn't very well argue with a man who drew a gun on me, could I?"

Danny cried, "Damn it, Merle, I know you, and I'm sick of you! I'm not saying you're always wrong in this. Some of them you've killed deserved it. But I can't stomach any more of that pose, Merle. You walk the earth like a fallen god, and men step back from those guns under your vest. Take them away from you, Merle, and you're nothing—you're less than nothing."

Workman said, in a voice that was very tired, "I'll kill you, Danny."

"No, you won't," Danny said. "Because I know you now. You never grew up, Merle. You were a kid with an itch that came up with the sun, and you've chased something all your life. You've never caught it, and you never will, and you've tried to cover it with something else. You've hunted men like rabbits—and by God, you didn't even have the guts to do that out in the open. You've hid behind a job as agent for the company, and you've made the reputation of a man-hunting wolf—but you and I know how it was done. You pushed and you hounded them, and when you closed in, you came at them with your hands empty and looked away. And when they bit on your bait, you killed them."

He looked at Workman, the dull white lower half of his face showing, the eyes hidden under the black splash of shadow from the moonlight. "What does it do for you, Merle, to kill a man? To see him go down kicking under your guns? Soothe the itch, does it, Merle?"

Merle Workman cried in a sobbing voice, "Damn you, Danny!" and lashed at him with his fist, crowding his horse in on Danny's. Danny fended off the blow with an upflung arm, and then Workman's clawing hand caught at his collar and as the horse shied away, his weight came on Danny and they fell together.

Danny rolled and shook off Workman's weight, and said, "I can whip you, Merle. Don't be a fool."

But Workman came in again, clawing insanely, and Danny hit him lightly, not really wanting to hurt him, and then he felt the hands at his belly, and knew he'd done it all wrong. Workman had fooled him again. Workman hadn't broken.

For Workman had one of the .44s now, and he could light a match at ten feet with either hand with them. Even as he fell back before the light blow, Workman's eyes were on Danny, cold and malicious with sardonic laughter, and the snub-nosed .44 was coming around with Workman's thumb on the hammer.

Danny said, "Don't!" even as he drew in an unthinking motion, thrusting out his own gun and thumbing off the shot as the .44

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roared from an arm's length away; and then Workman wheeled half away from him and made a crying sound and shot the .44 into the ground again and fell forward.

Merle Workman looked as old as sin. His grayish whiskers had sprouted since last morning's shave, and he looked old and tired and sick. His polished ice-chip eyes, with that little match-light of fire behind them, came on Danny, and Workman said very softly, "Oh, you lucky damned fool, Danny!" Then he died.

Danny turned and walked blindly into his own horse, caught at the saddle horn, and clung there a moment, feeling vague sickness inside and a dull wonder whether his legs were going to hold him up.

For a moment, the temptation to forget the rest of this job was almost overwhelming. It would be so easy to do it that way; take Workman back in and resign—turn it over to another company agent. Nobody could blame him.

Then he thought of Workman, and what he had become, lying to himself with little half lies, cutting corners with his conscience, and he swung up into the saddle and lifted the reins.

Emily, he thought, *I've got to do it.* I've got to do this one before I quit. Maybe you won't be able to see it. But I've got to do it. If I don't, someday I'll look at you and tell myself I bought you, that night, with what I didn't do. So I've got to do it, Emily. I'll have to take in your brother, and then I'll have to make it up with you. We'll have time, after today—a lifetime.

He crossed the ridge, and in the faint early light he saw the cabin, a rough, shake-roofed shack, sleeping in the new day. He rode up slowly, until he was close enough, then drew the gun and held it across his thigh. He took a deep breath and called, "John Hanseldt, come out!"

Then he swung down, the gun a plainly visible warning in his fist, and waited.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARGERY ALLINGHAM**

TITLE: ***Catching at Straws***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Judith Davies

LOCALE: Springmead, England

TIME: 1933 and 1955

COMMENTS: *Dorinda the beautiful, Dorinda with a ukulele on her knee, Dorinda the lost angel . . . she had been shot when Peter and Judith were only children, but her murder still threatened them.*

"DARLING," JUDITH SAID, THE COLOR bright on her cheeks and her gaze fixed firmly on the sea of flowers below her, "you shot her. Admit it and that's all there is to be said. But if you persist in sticking to the old story, you're deceiving yourself rather than me, and in that case how can you expect us ever to be happy?"

The two were standing on the terrace at the back of the college, their heads close together as they leaned over the parapet. Judith Davies was 27, a slender reed of a woman with the sensitive, intelligent face of her calling. She was a doctor specializing in the nervous diseases of childhood, and at the moment she was facing an appalling problem.

In the short space of five weeks the man who now stood beside her had become the most important person in her world. He was Peter Butler, three years her senior, a brilliant research chemist, kind, successful, and easily the best-looking man she had ever seen.

A chance meeting at the university hospital, where she was taking a refresher course, had developed into a headlong love affair which had culminated this afternoon when they had each realized that it was marriage they wanted and without it there was to be no happiness for either of them anywhere.

Yet they had never been quite strangers. Although they had hardly

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spoken before meeting at the university, they had known of each other for most of their lives and had seen each other frequently throughout the years, and never entirely without some emotion.

They had both been brought up in Springmead, the small town where Judith was the daughter of the local doctor and Peter the son of the County Architect. In the normal way they would have grown up as friends but one sunny day twenty-two years before, in the long warm summer of 1933, there had been a tragedy. Late in an August afternoon the body of Dorinda Davies, the doctor's nineteen-year-old sister who was spending the summer with her brother's family, had been found in a meadow by the bank of the narrow river just outside the town. She had been shot at close quarters with a light sporting gun which lay in the grass some distance from the dead girl, while the family's punt, in which she had been seen alone earlier in the day, was found tied up to the willows which overhung the stream.

Judith had been too young at the time for her to remember the disaster clearly, but she had a very vivid recollection of the horror and bewilderment it had caused; and by the time she had grown up she had heard every detail of the story many times.

The country police had established the ownership of the gun without any difficulty. It belonged to Peter's father, the architect, who with his wife was away at the time on a weekend motoring trip, leaving Peter, their only child—then a boy of eight—in the care of an old housekeeper. The boy was not allowed to use the gun and, in fact, had been punished more than once for borrowing it; but he was a lonely little person who was fascinated by the wild life of the countryside. His favorite hunting place was along the river bank and for a long time it had been his ambition to shoot a water rat. Before the day was out the police had half a dozen witnesses who had seen the small boy trotting down to the river with the .410 under his arm.

Almost from the beginning it had seemed that there was no mystery. It appeared evident that there had been an accident in which the child, either when showing the girl the gun or pointing it at her in fun, had pulled the trigger inadvertently. Peter was found and questioned. At first he had denied everything, but after his parents had been recalled and his mother had talked to him, he told a story from which he never deviated afterward despite every conceivable threat and promise.

Knowing he was doing wrong, he said, he had taken the gun down to the river to have one more try for a rat. He was just in position, crouched down by a tree stump, when Dorinda, whom he knew only slightly, came along in her boat. She was singing and he called out to her, asking her to be quiet. He thought

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he must have frightened her, he said, for she stopped the punt, grew very red, and was furious with him for being there at all. She asked him if his father knew about him having the gun and when he told her "No," she insisted that he give it to her at once before he did any harm with it.

Peter did not want to give it up; but when she promised that if he went straight home she would smuggle it into the house without telling on him, he accepted the situation philosophically—people were always pushing him around, he complained. He parted with the gun and according to him that was the last time he saw it, lying in the bottom of the boat as Dorinda sped down the river. After that he went home. There was nobody about and so for a time he played in the garden, falling asleep at last in a hideaway he had made in the laurels.

It was an inconclusive story and nobody really believed him. The hideous facts remained. Dorinda the beautiful, with her red-brown hair and her roving eyes, was dead—and nothing could bring her back again.

The whole town was heartbroken, and sympathy for the two families was great. Not unnaturally, the authorities combined to give the child the benefit of the doubt. The Coroners Court brought in an open verdict and Peter was sent away to boarding school. For the first few years he spent his holidays away from home, but in time the story was largely forgotten. Springmead had other scandals to talk about, and at length he began to visit his home again.

The two families kept apart however. There were no recriminations but always after that there was a conviction among the Davies' and their friends that the "Butler boy" was a dangerous young liar with bad blood in him somewhere.

Today, as she stood in the quiet garden, twenty-two years away from it all, Judith Davies remembered the story and her lips twisted wryly. It seemed such a simple tragedy.

"It was so obviously just a ghastly accident," she said aloud. "It might have happened to any child. At the time you were terrified and you denied it. That seems to me to have been a perfectly normal reaction but *now,* when it's all over, if you persist in the delusion *now* . . ."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake!" The man turned on her savagely. He was pale with anger and the eyes which looked down into her own were black with remembered pain. "I don't expect you to accept the miserable tale," he said bitterly. "No one ever has. Ever since that day no one, not even my mother, has ever quite trusted me. Unfortunately, unless I'm insane, it happened just exactly as I said it did. As far as I know—*with my conscious mind*—the last time I had the gun in my hand was when I passed it over Dorinda and she put it in the boat."

"But . . ."

"I know!" His violence silenced

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her. "You're going to say I'm deceiving myself. Perhaps I am. At this distance who can possibly tell? Forget it, Judith, and maybe you'd better forget me too. This is what happens all the time. Let's call it a day, shall we?"

"No." She put her hand over his and spoke impulsively. "No. I believe you, Peter."

"You do?" His rage turned to bitter amusement. "You'd lie for me, would you, darling? That's very dangerous. No, my dear, it's no use. That business is bound to haunt me all my life. The damage is done, you see. Sometimes I feel certain I must have had a brainstorm and killed her without knowing it. If that is so, when am I going to have another? It's one of those perfectly frightful questions which can never be answered. No one can ever discover the truth."

"I will!" Judith spoke with sudden recklessness. "I'll find out. That's the only thing which can give you peace of mind. Oh, my dear, how horribly you must have suffered! I'll find out."

Peter laughed softly. "How can you, sweetheart? Don't think we haven't tried. When I was a child my father worried himself into his grave, trying to find some other explanation. There wasn't a scrap of gossip in the town or a blade of grass in the meadow that he didn't examine. It was all useless. He died without being sure."

Judith leaned over the parapet to hide her eyes. "If you say it happened that way, that's the way it happened for me."

Peter was touched but unconvinced. "So you think now," he said. "But there'll always be the doubt in your mind. That's something I do know—I've seen it too often. When Dad first heard the chatter about young Dorinda he felt certain he was on to something and for a time it comforted him; but it didn't last. Always he came back to the same blank wall. There was no proof, you see—no proof at all."

"Chatter about Dorinda?" Judith was surprised. "I was only a baby at the time, I never heard any. My people always spoke of her as their lost angel, naturally. Was there any real gossip?"

"Nothing which seems of the least importance at this distance," Peter said, hunching his shoulders. "She seems to have been just a high-spirited youngster of the Charleston period who had more freedom than girls in Springmead had known before. All the men were crazy about her. She was very pretty, you know."

She nodded. "I've seen photographs and, of course, there's the famous painting. We have a reproduction of it hanging in the hall at home. It was painted two years after she died but everybody says it's exactly like her."

Peter was silent for a moment. "Ye-es," he said at last. "*Girl With the Ukulele*. I remember it coming out. It made a sensation when it ap-

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peared in the Academy and there were paragraphs in the newspapers recalling the tragedy. I was at school at the time." He shivered and covered it with a laugh. "I know Dad considered that John Rider was pretty tasteless to paint it at all, and I believe he wrote and told him so. Your people knew Rider well, didn't they?"

"No, I don't think we did," she said as if the fact had suddenly struck her as surprising. "He wasn't a friend. I always heard that he and his wife had hired the Johnson's cottage near us for that summer when Dorinda died. Everybody took them up because they were odd and exciting and they were invited everywhere. I don't think *Girl With the Ukulele* was meant to be a portrait of Dorinda exactly, although I believe Rider had made sketches of her. He drew most of the girls of the day. I heard he sketched all the time. It was just chance that the picture came out so much like her, I suppose. Where is he now?"

"He died. Just after the war, in South Africa. So you can't go rushing around to ferret him out and discover what he remembered." Peter was regarding her helplessly, affection for her fighting with his exasperation. "I don't think he'd have told you anyway. He wasn't a very helpful character."

"I remember hearing that." Judith frowned as she strove to remember more. "He was always fighting with his wife, wasn't he?"

"They were pretty notorious. Wild people, I guess, who shook our respectable little community. The woman was a Spanish gypsy or something equally outlandish. He was said to be terrified of her tantrums."

"Did she die too?"

"She's gone away—we'd never find her. And if we did, what could she possibly tell us that would be convincing? Judith, my darling, you're behaving exactly as my father did—you're catching at straws. There's no proof and there never will be, and now that you've let the thing get hold of you there's no future for us. If I let you tie yourself to me now, this will haunt you forever."

"Oh, but it shan't!" she cried out with sudden passion. "I won't let it. I'll find out."

A weary, mulish look settled over Peter's clear-cut face. "I wish to God we could," he said soberly. "I don't want to lose you, Judith. I love you too much, but you don't know what a worry of this sort is like. It grows on you and gets at you when you're not expecting it."

"Listen." Her hand tightened over his. "Our house is closed at the moment because mother and father are abroad, but the people next door have a key. In a cupboard under the attic stairs there is a bundle tied up in sacking. In it are all the things which came back from the police after the inquest on Dorinda. My father wouldn't even let the bundle be opened—he said it was 'morbid.'

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But of course he just couldn't bear to look at her things. I know about them because one day, when I was in my teens, I dragged the bundle out and got in a fine old row for doing it. So it was put back and as far as I know it's still there."

"Do you mean her clothes?" Peter was staring at her in a kind of dismay. "I remember the green dress she was wearing. The police made a great point of it because it was new. She'd never worn it before and yet I could describe it because I'd seen her, as I admitted I had. When they showed it to me at the police station it had blood all over it. Gosh, it was horrible! Somehow much worse than anything I ever saw in the war."

"No. There are no clothes there," Judith said quickly, startled by his expression. "Only the things she had with her in the punt. Odds and ends —a book she was reading, some sewing, I think, and the uke. I remember that particularly. It was so pretty and so gay. Peter, why don't we go down there and look?"

"Now?"

"Why not? It's less than thirty miles. Let's get those things out and examine them. There may be a clue there. The police were not looking for an explanation to a mystery, remember."

"That's true," he admitted hesitantly. "They made up their minds what had happened as soon as they saw the gun. It wasn't even tested for fingerprints until it had been handled by so many people that any test would have been useless. That point told in my favor, I remember. Oh, I'll drive you over willingly—but its pretty hopeless, Judith."

The girl said nothing as she linked her arm through his.

They found the bundle in the cupboard. It was early evening when they stood together in the upper hall of the old-fashioned family house and the late sun was warm as it streamed through the staircase window. Silence and airlessness seemed to enhance the forlornness of their quest. The few crumpled relics of the tragedy lay together where Judith had just put them on the settle under the reproduction of the famous picture.

It was a boldly painted canvas done in the careful, factual convention which never goes quite out of favor. Dorinda had been a lovely girl; her red-brown hair was cropped but curling and her boyish figure looked young in the shapeless dress. She was sitting against a tree bole, her ukulele on her knee; her smile was mischievous and provocative and, in an inexplicable way, heartless. It was a strange painting altogether. The artist had caught something reckless in his remembered model. Peter stood looking at the picture in astonishment.

"I didn't see her like that," he said. "But then I wouldn't—I was much too young. I can see why the picture was a riot though, can't you?

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She looks like every minx in history!"

Judith did not answer. She was turning over the contents of the bundle with slow inquisitive hands.

There was not much there. Only the few casual items which a girl of the period might have been expected to take with her for an afternoon of lazing on the river. The ukulele, still bright with colored ribbons, lay beside an old-fashioned box camera, a glove, an empty candy carton, some yellowed sewing in a cretonne bag, and a novel by Elinor Glyn.

Judith took up the shabby camera and turned it over. There was still a roll of film in it but when she rubbed the dust away from the indicator circle, only a faint 1 was revealed darkly on the red.

Peter threw up his hands.

"She didn't have time to photograph anything," he said. "That's all that means. It's no good, darling—we're wasting our time. Let's go."

"Not yet." Judith was obstinate. "There's just one last chance and you must let me take it. Drive me down to old Tryce the photographer in High Street. His shop will be closed but he lives over it and he'll develop this film for us while we wait. It's quite hopeless because the spool is more than twenty years old and, as the police must have thought at the time, it hasn't been exposed anyhow; but it's the only thing here which might tell us anything and it'll haunt me if I don't try it."

"It'll haunt you anyhow," Peter muttered. But he did not argue.

Yet as they waited in the small room behind the old photographer's shop where an astonished but obliging Mr. Tryce had left them, the rift which had been threatening to divide them all day became suddenly apparent. Peter was nearing the end of his endurance.

"Look," he burst out suddenly. "I can't stand this. Forgive me. If you want to be driven back, I'll wait for you, but not—here."

"Oh, but, darling, why not wait another minute or two?"

"I can't," he said. "It's so utterly useless. Even supposing there *was* a picture, what on earth could it tell us? Do you imagine she was taking a photograph at the exact moment she was shot?"

His face had grown haggard.

"Perhaps you do think so? Perhaps you think that instead of asking me to give her the gun she took a snap of me to show my father that I had it out without permission and to stop her I raised the gun . . ."

"Peter! Don't. Don't, darling."

They were so utterly engrossed that the sudden entrance of the photographer from the darkroom took them by surprise. The old man was excited.

"This is extraordinary," he began without preamble. "And very gratifying. How many years did you tell me, Judith? Over twenty, and no sign of deterioration in the film at all! Well, well!"

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Both young people stared at him as at a ghost. Peter spoke first.

"Do you mean to say you— you've got a picture?"

"A beauty." Mr. Tryce peered at him over his spectacles. "Isn't that what you wanted? Only one, I'm afraid. Only the first section had been exposed and the film hadn't been wound on to the next number. The camera had been kept in the dark, I expect. Bit of luck, that."

In the unnatural silence which had fallen over the room Judith's voice sounded very small.

"Is it . . . *is it of a child?*"

The old man went back into the darkroom and returned at once with a glazed dish.

"Here's a rough print," he said. "Let me see? Hardly a child. No. A young woman. A very pretty young woman. I feel I know her, too. In fact, the whole picture has something oddly familiar about it."

Judith and Peter moved over to the old man's side.

"Dorinda!" Judith caught her breath. "Dorinda in her new dress playing her ukulele! Oh, Peter, don't you see? *It's the same as the painting!* It's exactly like the Academy picture itself! Only the willows and the punt tied up in the background are different. Oh, my darling, don't you see what this means?"

Peter was gazing at the wet print.

"The picture John Rider was to paint two years later!" he said huskily. "But this is madness! *Who took this photograph?*"

"Who could have taken it?" Judith's voice quivered. "Who was the only person who could possibly have taken it? Who must have remembered Dorinda so vividly at the moment he took that snap that the picture stayed in his mind although he never saw the developed negative? Who was Dorinda going to meet when she was so angry with you at being in the way?"

Peter was trembling. "The painter! John Rider! Did he . . . kill her?"

Judith put her arm through his. "He was with her *after* you left," she said. "We've proof of that because there is the punt tied up just as it was found later. We know it was Rider because he painted her afterwards. Who else would have known and remembered that exact pose? Did he kill her because she made fun of him or did that wife of his sneak up on him when he was making love to her? That's a question which can never be answered, but the important proof is here. It wasn't you, Peter. I've known that all day."

"Have you?" Peter thrust an arm round her shoulders. "Then why did you have to have proof?"

Judith did not reply and old Mr. Tryce, who had been completely out of his depth, suddenly found the conversation intelligible and stepped into the breach.

"Perhaps she was trying to convince you of something, my boy," he said cheerfully. "Women are always up to tricks like that, you know."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CORNELL WOOLRICH**

TITLE: ***Wait for Me Downstairs***

TYPE: Detective-Suspense Story

DETECTIVE: Dick Gilman

LOCALE: New York City

COMMENTS: *All Steffie was supposed to do was deliver a package. It wouldn't take a minute. But nearly half an hour passed and she didn't come out . . . Woolrich in top form — the terror of "everyday-gone-wrong" . . .*

SHE WAS ALWAYS THE LAST ONE OUT, even on the nights I came around to pick her up—that was another thing that burned me up. Not with her of course, but with her job there. Well, she was on the last leg of it now—it would be over with pretty soon. We weren't going to be one of those couples where the wife kept on working after the marriage. She'd already told them she was leaving anyway, so it was all settled. I didn't blame her for hanging on up to the very end. The couple of extra weeks pay would come in handy for a lot of little this-ems and that-ems that a girl about to settle down always likes to buy herself (knowing she's going to have a tough time getting them afterwards). But what got me was: why did she always have to be the last one out?

I picketed the doorway, while the cave-dwellers streamed out all around me. Everyone but her. Back and forth, back and forth; all I needed was a "Don't Patronize" sign and a spiel. Finally I even saw the slave-driver she worked for come out, but still no her. He passed by without knowing me, but even if he had he wouldn't have given me any sunny smiles.

And then finally she came—and the whole world faded out around us and we were just alone on the crowded sidewalk. I've heard it called love.

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She was very good to look at, which was why I'd waited until I was twenty-five and met her. Here's how she went: first a lot of gold all beaten up into a froth and poured over her head and allowed to set there in crinkly little curls. Then a pair of eyes that—I don't know how to say it. You were in danger of drowning if you looked into them too deep, but, boy, was drowning a pleasure. Yes, blue. And then a mouth with real lines. Not one of those things all smeared over with red jam.

She had about everything just right, and believe me I was going to throw away the sales-slip and not return the merchandise once it got up to my house.

For trimmings, a dark-blue skirt and a short little jacket that flared out from her shoulders, and a kind of cockeyed tam o' shanter. And a package. I didn't like the looks of that package.

I told her so the minute I stepped up and took off my hat, while she was still looking down the other way for me. "What's that?"

She said, "Oh, Kenny, been waiting long? I hurried all I could. This? Oh, just a package. I promised His Nibs I'd leave it at a flat on Martine Street on my way home."

"But you're not going home. I've got two ducats for *Heavens-abustin* and I was gonna take you to Rafft's for dinner first; I even brought a clean collar to work with me this morning. Now this is going to cut down our time for eating to a shadow—"

She tucked her free hand under my arm to pacify me. "It won't take any time at all—it's right on our way. And we can cut out the fruit cup or something."

"Aw, but you always look so classy eating fruit cup," I mourned.

But she went right ahead; evidently the matter had already been settled between us without my knowing about it. "Wait a minute, let me see if I've got the address straight. Apartment 4F, 415 Martine Street. Mr. Muller. That's it."

I was still grouching about it, but she already had me under control. "What are you supposed to do, double as an errand girl, too?" But by that time we were halfway there, so what was the use of kicking any more about it?

"Let's talk about us," she said. "Have you been counting the days?"

"All day. Thirteen left."

"And a half. Don't forget the half, if it's to be a noon wedding." She tipped her shoulders. "I don't like that thirteen by itself. I'll be glad when it's tomorrow, and only twelve left."

"Gee, you're cute," I beamed admiringly. "The more I know you, the cuter you get."

"I bet you won't say that a year from now. I bet you'll be calling me your old lady then."

"This is it," I said.

"That's right, 415." She backed up, and me with her. "I was sailing

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right on past it. See what an effect you have on me?"

It was the kind of building that still was a notch above a tenement, but it had stopped being up-to-date about 1929. We went in the outer vestibule together, which had three steps going up and then a pair of inner glass doors, to hold you up until you said who you were.

"All right, turn it over to the hall-man or whoever it is and let's be on our way."

She put on that conscientious look that anything connected with her job always seemed to bring out. "Oh, no, I'm supposed to take it up personally and get a receipt. Besides, there doesn't seem to be any hall-man . . ."

She was going to do it her way anyway, I could see that, so there was no use arguing. She was bent over scanning the name-plates in the brass letter-boxes set into the marble trim. "What'd I say that name was again?"

"I dunno, Muller or something," I said sulkily.

"That's it. What would I do without you?" She flashed me a smile for a bribe to stay in good humor, then went ahead scanning. "Here it is. 4F. The name-card's fallen out of the slit, no wonder I couldn't find it." She poked the button next to it. "You wait downstairs here for me," she said. "I won't take a minute."

"Make it as fast as you can, will you? We're losing all this good time out of being together."

She took a quick step back toward me. "Here," she said, "let this hold you until I come down again." And that mouth I told you about went right up smack against mine—where it belonged. "And if you're very good, you may get a chaser to that when I come down again."

Meanwhile the inner vestibule-door catch was being sprung for her with a sound like crickets with sore throats. She pushed it open and went inside. It swung shut again, cutting us off from one another. But I could still see her through it for a moment longer, standing in there by the elevator and waiting to go up. She looked good even from the back. When the car came down for her, she didn't forget to turn around and flash me another heartbreaker across her shoulder, before she stepped in and set the control-button for the floor she wanted. It was self-service, and there was nobody else in it.

The door closed after her, and I couldn't see her any more. I could see the little red light that indicated the car was in use, gleaming for a few minutes after that, and then that went out too. And there wasn't anything left of her.

I lit a cigarette and leaned against the right-hand wall. Then my shoulder got tired and I leaned against the left-hand wall. Then both my shoulders got tired and I just stood up by myself in the middle.

I've never timed a cigarette. I suppose they take around five minutes. This one seemed to take longer, but

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then look who I was waiting for. I punched it out with my foot without bothering to throw it out through the door; I didn't live there after all.

I thought: "Nice and fast. I mighta known it." Then I thought: "What's she doing, staying to tea?"

I counted my change, just to give myself something to do. I took off my hat and looked it over, like I'd never seen it before.

Things happened. Nothing much—little things that were to last so long. The postman came into the vestibule, shoved letters in here and there. 4F didn't get any. He shifted his girth straps and went out again. A stout lady in a not-very-genuine fur coat came in, one arm full of bundles and hauling a yowling little kid by the other. She looked to see if there was any mail first. Then she looked at me, kind of supercilious. If a look can be translated into a single word, her's said: "Loafer!" Meanwhile the kid was beefing away. He had adenoids or something, and you couldn't tell if he was talking English or choking to death. She seemed to be able to tell the difference though. She said: "Now Donald, I don't want to hear another word! If pot cheese is good enough for your father, pot cheese is good enough for you! If you don't hush up, I'll give you to this man here!"

I thought: "Oh, no, you won't—not with a set of dishes thrown in!"

After they'd gone, more waiting started in. I started to trace patterns with my feet—circles, diagonals, Maltese crosses. After I'd done a couple of dozen, I stopped to rest again. I started to talk to myself, under my breath. "Must be out of pencils up there, to sign the receipt with, and she's waiting while they whittle out a new one! We'll be in time for the intermission at the show—"

I lit another cigarette. That act, slight as it was, put the finishing touch to my self-control. I no sooner finished doing it than I hit the opposite wall with it. "What the hell is this anyway?" It wasn't under my breath any more—it was a full-toned yap. I stepped over, picked out 4F, and nearly sent the button through to the other side of the wall.

I didn't want to go in, of course. I just wanted to tip her off I was still alive down here. Aging fast, but still in fairly usable shape. She'd know who it was when she heard that blast. So when they released the catch on the door, I intended staying right outside where I was.

But they didn't. They were either ignoring the ring or they hadn't heard it. I gave it a second flattening. Again the catch on the door remained undisturbed. I knew the bell wasn't out of order, because I'd seen her give just a peck at it and the door-catch had been released for her. This time I gave it a triple-header. Two short ones and a long one, that went on for weeks—

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so long that my thumb joint got all white almost down to my wrist before I let go.

No acknowledgment. Dead to the world up there.

I did the instinctive thing, even though it was quite useless in the present case. Backed out into the street, as far as the outer rim of the sidewalk, and scanned the face of the building. There was just a checkerboard pattern of lighted squares and black ones. I couldn't tell which windows belonged to 4F, and even if I could have, it wouldn't have done me any good unless I intended yelling her name up from the open sidewalk—and I didn't yet.

But being all the way out there cost me a chance to get in free, and lost me some more valuable time in the bargain. A man came out, the first person who had emerged from inside since I'd been waiting around, but before I could get in there, the door had clicked shut again.

He was a scrawny-looking little runt, like an old-clothes-man on his night off. He went out without even looking at me, and I tackled the 4F bell some more, giving it practically the whole Morse Code.

I wasn't frightened yet, just sizzling and completely baffled. The only thing I could figure, far-fetched as it was, was that the bell apparatus had been on its last gasp when she rang it, and had given up the ghost immediately afterwards. Otherwise why didn't they hear it, with the kind of punishment I was giving it?

Then the first little trickle of fright did creep in, like a dribble of cold water down your back when you're perspiring. I thought: "Maybe there's some guy up there trying to get funny with her—maybe that's why the bell isn't answered. After all, things like that do happen in a big city all the time. I better get up there fast and find out what this is!"

I punched a neighboring bell at random, just to get past the door, and when the catch had been released for me, I streaked into the elevator, which the last guy had left down, and gave it the 4-button.

It seemed to me to set a new record for slowness in getting up there, but maybe that was just the state of mind I was in. When it finally stopped, and I barged out, I made a false turn down the hall first, then when I came up against 4B and C and so on, turned and went back the other way.

It was at the far end of the hall, at the back. The bell I'd rung was evidently on some other floor, for none of the doors on this one opened to see who it was. I went close against 4F and listened. There were no sounds of a scuffle and I couldn't hear her saying "Unhand me, you brute!"—so I calmed down by that much. But not all the way.

I couldn't hear anything at all. It was stone-silent in there. And yet these flat-doors weren't soundproof,

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because I could hear somebody's radio filtering through one at the other end of the hall clear as day.

I rang the bell and waited. I could hear it ring inside. I'd say, "Will you ask that young lady who brought a package up here whether she's coming down tonight or tomorrow?" No, that sounded too dictatorial. I'd say, "Is the young lady ready to leave now?" I knew I'd feel slightly foolish, like you always do when you make a mountain out of a molehill.

Meanwhile, it hadn't opened. I pushed the bell again, and again I could hear the battery sing out on the inside. I rapped with my knuckles. Then I rang a third time. Then I rattled the knob (as though that would attract their attention, if ringing the bell hadn't!) Then I pounded with the heel of my hand. Then I alternated all three, the whole thing became a hurricane of frenzied action. I think I even kicked. Without getting the result I was after—admittance.

Other doors began to open cautiously down the line, attracted by the noise I was making. But by that time I had turned and bolted down the stairs, without waiting for the paralytic elevator, to find the janitor. Fright wasn't just a cold trickle any more: it was an icy torrent gushing through me full-force.

I got down into the basement and found him without too much trouble. He was eating his meal on a red-checkered tablecloth, but I had no time to assimilate details. A glimpse of a napkin tucked in collarwise was about all that registered. "Come up with me quick, will you?" I panted, pulling him by the arm. "Bring your passkey, I want you to open one of those flats!"

"What's the matter, something wrong?"

"I don't like the looks of it. My girl took a package up—I've been waiting for her over twenty minutes and she never came down again. They won't answer the bell—"

He seemed to take forever. First he stood up, then he finished swallowing, then he wiped his mouth, then he got a big ring of keys, finally he followed me. As an afterthought he peeled off the napkin and threw it behind him at the table, but missed it. He even wanted to wait for the elevator. "No, no," I groaned, steering him to the stairs.

"Which one is it?"

"It's on the fourth floor, I'll show you!" Then when we got up there, "Here—right here."

When he saw which door I was pushing him to, he suddenly stopped. "That one? No, now wait a minute, young fellow, it couldn't be. Not that one."

"Don't try to tell me!" I heaved exasperatedly. "I say it is!"

"And don't you try to tell me! I say it couldn't be!"

"Why?"

"I'll show you why," he said heatedly. He went up to it, put his passkey in, threw the door open,

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and flattened himself to let me get a good look past him.

I needed more than just one. It was one of those things that register on the eye but don't make sense to the brain. The light from the hall filtered in to make a threadbare half-moon, but to make sure I wasn't missing any of it, he snapped a switch inside the door and a dim, left-over bulb somewhere further back went on flickeringly. You could see why it had been left in—it wasn't worth taking out. It threw a watery light around, not much better than a candle. But enough to see by.

"Now! You see why?"

The place was empty as a barn. Unfurnished and uninhabited. Just bare walls, ceiling, and floor-boards. You could see where the carpet used to be: a lighter patch in the middle of the floor. You could see where a picture used to hang, many moons ago: there was a patch of gray wool-dust adhering like fiber to the wall. You could even see where the telephone used to stand: the wiring still led in along the baseboard, then reared up to waist-level like a pot-hook and ended in nothing.

The air alibied for its emptiness. It was stale, as though the windows hadn't been opened for months. Stale and dusty and sluggish.

"So you see? Mister, this place ain't been rented for six months." He was getting ready to close the door, as though that ended it; pulling it around behind his back, I could see it coming toward me, and the *4F* stencilled on it in tarnished gold-paint seemed to swell up, got bigger and bigger until it loomed before me a yard high.

"No!" I croaked, and planted the flat of my hand against it and swept it back, out of his backhand grasp. "She came in here, I tell you!"

I went in a step or two, called her name into the emptiness. "Steffie! Steffie!"

He stayed pat on the rational, everyday plane of things as they ought to be, while I rapidly sank down below him onto a plane of shadows and terror. Like two loading platforms going in opposite directions, we were already miles apart, cut off from each other. "Now, what're you doing that for?" he said. "Use your head. How can she be in here, when it's empty?"

"I saw her ring the bell and I saw the door open for her."

"You saw *this* door?" He was incredulous.

"The downstairs door. I saw the catch released for her, after she rang this bell."

"Oh, that's different. You must have seen her ring some other bell, and you thought it was this one; then somebody else opened the building-door for her. How could anyone answer from here? Six months the people've been out of here."

I didn't hear a word. "Lemme look! Bring more lights!"

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He shrugged, sighed, decided to humor me. "Wait, I get a bulb from the hall." He brought one in and screwed it into an empty socket in the room beyond the first. That did for practically the whole place. It was just two rooms, with bath and kitchenette.

"How is it the current's still on, if it's vacant?"

"It's on the house-meter, included in the rent. It stays on when they leave."

There was a fire-escape outside one pair of windows, but they were latched on the inside and you couldn't see the seams of the two halves any more through the coating of dust that had formed over them. I looked for and located the battery that gave juice to the downstairs doorbell. It had a big pouch of a cobweb hanging from it, like a thin-skinned hornet's nest. I opened a closet and peered into it. A wire coat-hanger that had been teetering off-balance for heaven knows how long swung off the rod and fell down with a clang.

He kept saying: "Now listen, be sensible. What are you, a child?"

I didn't care how it looked, I only knew how it felt. "Steffie," I said. I didn't call it any more, just said it. I went up close to him. He was something human, at least. I said, "What'll I do?" I speared my fingers through my hair, knocked off my new hat, and let it lie.

He wasn't much help. He was still on that other, logical plane, and I had left it long ago. He tried to suggest we'd had a quarrel and she'd given me the slip; he tried to suggest I go to her home, that I'd find her there waiting for me.

"She didn't come *out* again, damn you!" I flared. "If I'd been down at the corner—but I was right at the front door! What about the back way—is there one?"

"Not a back way, a delivery-entrance, but that goes through the basement, right past my quarters. No one came down there, I was sitting there eating my supper the whole time."

And another good reason was, the stairs from the upper floors came down on one side of the elevator, in the front hall. Then they continued on down to the basement on the *other* side of it. To get down there anyone would have to pass in front of the elevator, for its entire width. I'd been right out there on the other side of the glass vestibule-door, and no one had. So I didn't have to take his word for it. I had my own senses.

"Is there a Muller in the house anywhere at all?"

"No, no one by that name. We never had anyone by that name in the whole twelve years I been working here."

"Someone may have gotten in here and been lurking in the place when she came up—"

"It was locked, so how could anyone? You saw me open it with the **passkey.**"

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"Come on, we're going to ask the rest of the tenants on this floor if they heard anything or saw her at all."

We made the rounds of the entire five flats. 4E came to the door in the person of a hatchet-faced elderly woman, who looked like she had a good nose—or ear—for the neighbors' activities. It was the flat adjoining 4F, and it was our best bet. I knew if this one failed us, there wasn't much to hope for from the others.

"Did you hear anything next door to you within the past half hour?" I asked her.

"How could I? It's empty," she said tartly.

"I know, but *did you hear anything*—like anyone walking around in there, the door opening or closing, voices, or—" I couldn't finish it. I was afraid to say "a scream"—afraid she'd say yes.

"Didn't hear a pin drop," she said, and slammed the door. Then she opened it again. "Yes, I did, too. Heard the doorbell, the downstairs one, ringing away in there like fifty. With the place empty like it is, it sounded worse than a fire-alarm."

"That was me," I said, turning away disheartenedly.

As I'd expected after that, none of the others were any good either. No one had seen her, no one had heard anything out of the way.

I felt like someone up to his neck in quicksand, and going down deeper every minute. "The one underneath," I said, yanking him toward the stairs. "3F! If there was anything to be heard, they'd get it quicker through their ceiling than these others would through their walls."

He went down to the floor below with me and we rang. They didn't open. "Must be out, I guess," he muttered. He took his passkey, opened the door, and called their name. They were out all right; no one answered. We'd drawn another blank.

He decided he'd strung along with me just about far enough—on what after all must have seemed to him to be a wild goose chase. "Well," he said, slapping his sides and turning up his palms expressively. Meaning, "Now why don't you go home like a good guy and leave me alone?"

I wasn't having any. It was like asking you to leave your right arm behind you, chopped off at the shoulder. "You go up and stick there by that empty flat. I'm going out and get a cop." It sounds firm enough on paper, it came out plenty shaky and sick. I bounded down the stairs. In the vestibule I stopped short, punched the same 4F bell. His voice sounded hollowly through the interviewer after a minute. "Yuss?"

"It's me. The bell works all right up there, does it?"

"Sure."

"Okay, stay there. I'll be right

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back." I didn't know what good that had done. I went on out, bareheaded.

The cop I brought back with me wasn't anything to rave about on the score of native intelligence. But it was no time to be choosy. All he kept saying all the way back to the house was "All right, take it easy." He was on the janitor's plane, and immediately I had two of them against me instead of one.

"You saw her go in, did ye?"

I controlled myself with an effort. "Yes."

"But you don't know for sure which floor she got off at?"

"She rang 4F, so I know she got off at the fourth—"

"Wait a minute, you didn't *see* her, did ye?"

"No, I didn't see her."

"That's all I wanted to know. You can't say for sure she went into this flat, and the man here says it's been locked up for months."

He rang every bell in every flat of the building and questioned the occupants. No one had seen such a girl. The pot-cheese lady with the little boy remembered having seen me, that was the closest he got to anything. And one other flat, on the fifth, reported a ring at their bell with no follow-up.

I quickly explained I'd done that, to gain admittance into the building.

Three out of the twenty-four occupancies in the building were out; 1B, 3C, and 3F. He didn't pass them by either. Had the janitor open their doors and examined the premises. Not a trace of her.

That about ended his contribution. According to his lights he'd done a thorough job, I suppose. "All right," he said, "I'll phone it in for you. That's the most I can do."

The Lord knows how he expressed it over the wire. A single plainclothesman was dropped off at the door a few minutes later, came in to where the three of us were grouped waiting in the inner lobby. He looked me over like he was measuring me for a new suit of clothes. He didn't say anything.

"Hello, Gilman," the cop said. "This young fellow says he brought a girl here, and she disappeared in there." Putting the burden of the proof on me, I noticed. "I ain't been able to find anyone that saw her with him," he added helpfully.

"Let's look at the place," the dick said.

We all went up again. He looked around. Better than I had, maybe, but just as unproductively. He paid particular attention to the windows. Every one of the six—two regular-size apiece for the two main rooms, one small one each for the bath and kitchenette—was latched on the inside. There was a thick veneer of dust all around the frames and in the finger-grips. You couldn't have grabbed them any place without it showing. Then he studied the keyhole.

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He finally turned to me and gave me the axe. "There's nothing to show that she—or anyone else—ever came in here, bud."

"She rang the bell of this flat, and someone released the doorcatch for her from up here." I was beginning to think I could see a ghost in the corner.

"We're going to check on that right now," he said crisply. "There's already one false ring accounted for, attributable to you. What we want is to find out if there was a second one registered in the building."

We made the rounds again, all twenty-four flats. Again the fifth-floor flat reported my ring—and that was all. No one else had had any.

That should have been a point in my favor: she hadn't rung any of the other flats, therefore she must have rung 4F and been admitted from there—as I claimed. Instead he seemed to twist it around to my discredit: she hadn't rung any of the other flats and since there could have been no one in 4F to hear her ring and admit her from there, she hadn't rung any bell at all, she hadn't been admitted at all, she hadn't been with me at all. I was a wack. Which gave me a good push in the direction of being one, in itself.

I was in bad shape by now. I started to speak staccato. "Say listen, don't do this to me, will you? You all make it sound like she didn't come here with me at all."

He gave me more of the axe. "That's what it does sound like to us."

I turned northeast, east, east-by-south, like a compass on a binge. Then I turned back to him again. "Look." I took the show-tickets out of my pocket, held them toward him with a shaky wrist. "I was going to take her to a show tonight—"

He waved them aside. "We're going to build this thing from the ground up first and see what we've got. You say her name is Stephanie Riska." I didn't like that "you say." "Address?"

"120 Farragut."

"What'd she look like?"

I should have known better than to start in on that, It brought her before me too plainly. I got as far as "She comes up to here next to me—" Then I stopped again.

The cop and janitor looked at me curiously, like they'd never seen a guy cry before. I tried to turn my head the other way, but they'd already seen the leak.

The dick seemed to be jotting down notes, but he squeezed out a grudging "Don't let it get you" while he went ahead doing it.

I said, "I'm not scared because she's gone. I'm scared because she's gone in such a fairy-tale way. I can't get a grip on it. Like when they sprinkle a pinch of magic powder and make them disappear in thin air. It's got me all loose in the joints, and my guts are rattling against my backbone."

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My symptoms didn't cut any ice with him. He went right ahead with the business at hand. "And you met her at 6:15 outside the Bailey-Goodwin Building, you say, with a package to be delivered here. Who'd she work for?"

"A press-clipping service called the Green Star; it's a one-man organization, operated by a guy named Hessen. He just rented one dinky rear room, on the ground floor of the Bailey-Goodwin Building."

"What kind of business is that?"

"I don't know myself. She tried to explain it to me once. They keep a list of clients' names, and then they sift through the papers and follow them up. Any time one of the names appears, in connection with any social activity or any kind of mention at all, they clip the item out, and when they've got enough of them to make a little batch, they send them to the client, ready for mounting in a scrapbook. The price for the service is about ten bucks a hundred, or something like that."

"How is there any coin in that?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know myself, but she was getting a good salary."

"All right. Now let's do a little checking."

He took me back with him to where she worked, first of all. The building was dead, of course, except one or two offices, doing night work on the upper floors. He got the night watchman, showed his credentials, and had him open up the little one-room office and let us in.

I'd never been in the place myself until now. I'd always waited for her outside at the street-entrance at closing time. I don't think it was even intended for an office in the first place; it was more like a chunk of left-over storage space. It didn't even have a window in it, just an elongated vent up near the ceiling, with a blank shaft-wall about two feet away from it.

There was a flat-topped desk taking up one side—his, I guess—with a phone on it and a wire paper-basket and nothing else. And a smaller-size "desk," this time a real table and not a desk at all, with nothing on it at all. The rest was just filing cabinets. Oh, yeah, and a coat-rack. He must have been getting it for a song.

"What a telephone booth," remarked the dick.

He looked in the filing cabinets; they were just alphabetized names, with a scattering of newspaper clippings in them. Some of the names they didn't have any clippings for, and some of the letters they didn't even have any clients for—and I don't mean only X.

"There's not much more than a hundred bucks' worth of clippings in the whole kitty," Gilman said, "at your own estimate of what the charge was." He didn't follow up with what he meant by that, and I was too worried about her to pay any attention to his off-side remarks.

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The only thing that meant anything to me was, there was nothing around the place to show him that she had ever worked here or even been here in her life. Nothing personalized, I mean. The single drawer of the little table just had a pair of shears for clipping and a pot of paste for mounting, and a stack of little salmon-colored paper mounts.

The night watchman couldn't corroborate me, because the place was always locked up by the time he came on-shift. And the elevator operators that worked the building in the daytime wouldn't have been able to either, I knew, even if they'd been on hand, because this hole-in-the-wall was on a branch-off of the main entrance-corridor, and she didn't have to pass the cars on her way in from or out to the street; so they'd probably never seen her the whole time she'd worked here.

The last thing Gilman did, after he got Hessen's name and address, which was readily available in the place itself, was to open a penknife and cut a notch from the underside of the small table. At least, it looked like he was doing that from what I could see, and he kept his back to me and didn't offer any explanation. He thumbed me to the door and said, "Now we'll go out there and hear what he has to say."

It was a bungalow-type place on the outskirts, and without being exactly a mansion, it wasn't low-cost housing. You walked up flat stones to get to the door, and it had dwarf Japanese fir trees dotted all around it.

"Know him?" he said while we were waiting.

"By sight," I swallowed. I had a feeling of that quicksand I'd been bogging into ever since she'd left me in the lobby at Martine Street, of it being up to my eyes now and getting ready to close over the top of my head. This dick mayn't have taken sides yet, but that was the most you could say; he certainly wasn't on my side.

A guy with a thin fuzz on his head opened the door, stepped in to announce us, came back, and showed us in, all in fast time.

A typewriter was clicking away busily somewhere near at hand, and I thought it was him first, her boss, but it wasn't. He was smoking a porcelain-bowled pipe and reading a book under a lamp. Instead of closing the book, he just put his finger down on the last word he'd read to keep his place, so he could go right ahead as soon as this was over with. He was tall and lean, with good features, and dark hair cut so short it just about came out of his scalp and then stopped.

Gilman said, "Did you ever see this young fellow before?"

He eyed me. He had a crease under one eye; it wasn't a scar so much as an indentation from digging in some kind of a rimless glass. "No-o," he said with slow benevolence. A ghost of a smile pulled at his mouth. "What's he done?"

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"Know anyone named Muller, at 415 Martine Street?" There hadn't been any Muller in the filing cabinets at the office.

"No-o, I don't know anyone by that name there or anywhere else. I think we have a Miller, a Mrs. Elsie Miller, on our list, who all the time divorces and marries. Will that do?" He sighed tolerantly. "She owes us thirty dollars."

"Then you didn't send a package over to Muller, Apartment 4F, 415 Martine Street, at 6:15 this evening?"

"No," he said again, as evenly as the other two times. I started forward spasmodically. Gilman braked me with a cut of his hand. "I'm sure I didn't. But wait, it is easy enough to confirm that." He raised his voice slightly, without being boorish about it. And right there in front of me, he called out, "Stephanie. Stephanie Riska, would you mind coming in here a moment?"

The clicking of the typewriter broke off short and a chair scraped in the next room. "Steffie," I said huskily, and swallowed past agony, and the sun came up around me and it wasn't night any more, and the bad dream was over.

"My assistant happens to be right here at the house tonight; I had some dictation to give her and she is transcribing it. We usually mail out clippings, however—only when there is an urgent request do I send them around by personal messen—"

"Yes, sir?" a velvety contralto said from the doorway.

I missed some of the rest of it. The lights took a half-turn to the right, streaking tracks across the ceiling after them like comet-tails, before they came to a stop and stood still again. Gilman reached over and pulled me up short by the coat sleeve, as though I'd been flopping around loose in my shoes or something.

She was saying, "No I don't believe I do," in answer to something he had asked her, and looking straight over at me. She was a brunette of an exotic type, and she came up as high as me, and the sun had gone out again and it was night all over again.

"That isn't Steffie!" I bayed. "He's calling somebody else by her name!"

The pupils of his eyes never even deflected toward me. He arched his brows at Gilman. "She is the only young lady I have working for me."

Gilman was holding me back with sort of a half-nelson. Or half a half-nelson. The brunette appeared slightly agitated by my outburst, no more. She hovered uncertainly in the doorway, as though not knowing whether to come in or go out.

"How long have you been working for Mr. Hessen?" Gilman asked her.

"Since October of last year. About eight months now."

"And your name is Stephanie Riska?"

She smiled rebukingly, as if at the silliness of such a question. "Yes, of

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course." She decided to come a little farther into the room. But she evidently felt she needed some moral support to do so. She'd brought a small black handbag with her, tucked under her arm, when she left the typewriter. She opened it, so that the flap stood up toward Gilman and me, and plumbed in it for something. The two big gold-metal initials were easy to read, even upside-down; they were thick, bold capitals. *S. R.* The bag looked worn, as though she'd had it a long time. I could sense, rather than see, Gilman's mind's eye turned accusingly toward me: "What about it now?"—though his physical ones were fastened on the bag.

She got what she was looking for out of it, and she got more than she was looking for. She brought up a common ordinary stick of chewing gum in tinfoil, but she also accidentally brought up an envelope with it, which slipped through her fingers to the floor. She was very adroitly awkward, to coin a phrase.

Gilman didn't exactly dive for it, but he managed to get his fingers on it a half-inch ahead of hers. "Mind?" he said. I read the address on it with glazed eyes, over his shoulder. It had been postmarked and sent through the mail. *Miss Stephanie Riska, 120 Farragut Street.* He stripped the contents out of it and read the single sheet of notepaper. Then he gravely handed it back. Again I could feel his mind's eye on me.

She had broken the stick of chewing gum in half, put part between her lips, and the rest she was preparing to wrap up in tinfoil again for some other time. She evidently didn't like to chew too much at a time.

Gilman absently thumbed a vest pocket as though he would have liked some too. She noticed that. "May I offer you some?" she said gravely.

"I wish you would—my mouth's kind of dry." He put the second half-piece in his own trap. "And you didn't deliver a package for Mr. Hessen to 415 Martine Street this evening?" he said around it.

"No sir, I did not. I'm afraid I don't even know where Martine Street is."

That about concluded the formalities. And we were suddenly outside again, him and me, alone. In the dark. It was dark for me, anyway. All he said when we got back in the car was: "This 'girl' of yours, what kind of gum did she chew, wintergreen or licorice or what have you?"

What could I tell him but the truth? "She didn't chew gum."

He just looked at me. Then he took the nugget he'd mooched from the brunette out of his mouth, and he took a little piece of paper out of his pocket that held another dab in it, and he compared them—by scent. "I scraped this from under that desk in the office, and it's the same as what she gave me just now. Tutti-frutti. She belongs in that

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office, she parked her gum there. She had a letter addressed to herself in her handbag, and the initials on the outside checked. What's your racket, kid? Are you a pushover for mental observation? Or are you working off a grudge against this guy? Or did *you* do something to some little blonde blue-eyed number and are you trying to pass the buck in this way before we even found out about it?"

It was like a ton of bricks had landed all over my dome. I held my head with both hands to keep it in one piece and leaned way over toward the floor and said, "My God!"

He got me by the slack of the collar and snapped me back so viciously it's a wonder my neck didn't break.

"Things like this don't happen," I groaned. "They can't. One minute all mine, the next she isn't anywhere. And no one'll believe me."

"You haven't produced a single person all evening that actually laid eyes on this 'blonde girl' of yours," he said hard as flint. "Nowhere, d'you understand?"

"Where'd I get the name from then, and the address?"

He looked at me when I said that. "I'll give you one more spin for your money. You stand or fall by the place she lived." He leaned forward and he said "120 Farragut" to the driver. Then he kept eyeing me like he was waiting for me to break down and admit it was a hoax or I'd done something to her myself.

Once he said, "Remember, this girl at his place had a letter, three days old, addressed to *her*, giving this same address we're heading for now. If you still want to go through with it . . ."

"I took her home there," I said.

"Parents?"

"No, it's a rooming house. She was from Harrisburg. But the landlady—" Then I went, "O-oh," and let my head loll back against the back of the seat. I'd just remembered that Hessen had recommended the place to her.

He was merciless, noticed everything. "D'ye still want to make it there—or d'ye want to make it Headquarters? And the tougher you are with me, the tougher I'm going to be with you, buddy." His fist knotted up and his eyes iced over.

It was a case of self-preservation now. We were only minutes away. "Listen. Y'gotta listen to me. She took me up one night, just for a minute, to lend me a magazine she had in the room. Y'gotta listen to this, for heaven's sake. Sticking in the mirror of the dresser she's got a litho of the Holy Mother. On the radiator she's got a rag doll that I won for her at Coney Island." I split open my collar in front trying to bring it all back. "On a little shelf against the wall she's got a gas-ring, with a tube running up to the jet. From the light fixture to that jet there runs a string, and she'll have stockings hanging from it to dry. Are you listening? Will you remem-

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ber these things? Don't you see I *couldn't* make all these things up? Don't you see she's *real?"*

"You almost persuade me," he said, half under his breath. Which was a funny thing coming from a detective. And then we were there.

We stepped down and went in. "Now if you open your mouth," he said to me, teeth interlocked, "and say one word the whole time we're in here, I'll split your lip so wide open you'll be able to spit without opening your mouth." He sent for the landlady. I'd never seen her before. "Y'got a girl named Stephanie Riska living in your house?"

"Yep. Fourth-floor front." That was right.

"How long?"

"Riska?" She took a tuck in her cheek. "She's been rooming with me now six months." That was right too.

"I want to know what she looks like." He took a wicked half-turn in my arm that dammed up the blood.

"Dark hair, sort of dark skin. About as tall as this young fellow you got with you. She talks kind of husky."

"I want to see her room. I'm the police." He had to practically support me all the way up the four flights of stairs.

She threw open a door, gave it the switch. I came back to life enough to open my eyes. On the mirror, no picture. On the radiator, no rag doll. On the shelf no gas-ring, but a row of books. The jet had no tube plugged in—it was soldered over with lead. No string led from it to the light. No nothing.

"Has she always had it fixed this way?" Gilman asked.

"Always since the first day she's here. She's a real clean roomer. Only one thing I got to complain about—There it is again." She went over to the washstand and removed a little nugget of grayish substance that had been plastered to the underside of it. But she smiled indulgently, as though one such peccadillo were permissible.

Gilman took it from her on a scrap of paper, shifted it from left to right across his face. "Tutti-frutti," he said.

"Look out, you better hold up your friend!" she exclaimed in alarm.

He swung me so that instead of going down flat, I landed against him and stayed up. "Let him fold," he said to her. "That isn't anything to the falls he's going to be taking five or ten minutes from now." And we started down the stairs again, with two pairs of workable feet among the three of us.

"What'd he do, *murder* her?" she breathed avidly on the way down.

"Not her, but I got a good hunch he murdered someone—and picked the wrong name out of a hat."

She went: "Tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk. He don't *look* like—"

I saw some rheumatic lodger's knotty walking stick up-ended out of a brass umbrella-stand at the foot of the stairs. As he marched me by,

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I was on that side, luckily. I let my right arm fall behind us instead of in front, where it had been—he didn't have me handcuffed yet, remember—and the curved handle of the stick caught in my hand, and it came up out of the holder after me.

Then I swung it and I beaned him like no dick was ever beaned before. He didn't go down, he just staggered sideways against the wall and went, "Uff!"

She was bringing up in the rear. She went, "Oh!" and jumped back. I cleared the front steps at a bound. I went "Steffie! Steffie!" and I beat it in the dark. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't care, I only knew I had to find her. I came out so fast the driver of the headquarters car we'd left at the door wasn't expecting me. I'd already flashed around the corner before his belated "Hey, you!" came winging after me.

I made for the Martine Street flat. That was instinctive: the place I'd last seen her, calling me back. Either the car didn't start right up after me or I shook it off in my zigzag course through the streets. Anyway I got there still unhindered.

I ganged up on the janitor's bell, my windpipe making noises like a stuffed drainpipe. I choked, "Steffie!" a couple of times to the mute well-remembered vestibule around me. I was more demented than sane by now. Gilman was slowly driving me into the condition he'd already picked for me ahead of time.

The janitor came up with a sweater over his nightshirt. He said, "You again? What is it—didn't you find her yet? What happened to the detective that was with you?"

"He sent me back to take another look," I said craftily. "You don't have to come up—just gimme the passkey."

He fell for it, but killed a couple of valuable minutes going down to get it again. But I figured I was safe for the night; that it was my own place, across town, Gilman would make a beeline for.

I let myself in and lit it up and started looking blindly all around—for what I didn't know. I kept looking for the story-book ending—some magic clue that would pop up and give her back to me. I went around on my hands and knees, casing the cracks between the floorboards; I tested the walls for secret panels; I dug out plaster with my bare nails where there was a hole, thinking I'd find a bullet, but it was only a mouse hole.

I'd been in there about ten minutes when I heard a subtle noise coming up the hall-stairs outside. I straightened to my feet, darted through the door, and ran down the hall to the stairs. Gilman was coming up, like thunder across the China Bay, with a cop and the janitor at his heels. It was the fool janitor's carpet slippers, which had no heel-grip, that were making more noise than the shoes of the other two put together. Gilman had tape on the

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back of his skull and a gun in his hand. "He's up there now," the janitor was whispering. "I let him in about ten minutes ago; he said you sent him."

I sped up the stairs for the roof—the only way that was open to me now. That gave me away to them, and Gilman spurted forward with a roar. "Come down here you—I'll break every bone in your body!" The roof-stairs ended in a skylight door that I pushed through, although it should have been latched on the inside. There was about a yard-high partition-wall dividing the roof from the next one over. I tried to clear it too fast, miscalculated, and went down in a mess, tearing a hole in my trouser-knee and skinning my own knee beneath. That leg wouldn't work right for a minute or two after that, numb, and before I could get upright again and stumble away, they were on me. A big splatter of white shot ahead of me on the graveled roof from one of their torches, and Gilman gave what can only be described as an Iroquois war-whoop and launched himself through space in a flying tackle. He landed crushingly across my back, flattening me a second time.

And then suddenly the rain of blows that I'd expected was held in check, and he just lay inert on top of me, doing nothing. We both saw it at the same time, lying on the roof there a few yards ahead of us, momentarily lit up by the cop's switching torch, then lost again. I could recognize it because I'd seen it before. *The package that she'd brought over here tonight.*

"Hold that light steady!" Gilman bellowed, and got off me. We both went over to it at the same time, enmity forgotten. He picked it up, tore open the brown paper around it, and a sheaf of old newspapers slowly flattened themselves out. With squares and oblongs scissored out of them here and there. She hadn't been sent over with clippings, but with the valueless remnants of papers after the clippings had already been taken out. It was a dummy package, used to send her to her—disappearance.

The rest of it went double-quick—or seemed to. It had built up slow; it unraveled fast.

"Someone did bring a package here tonight, kid," was the way he put it. "And if I give you that much, I'll give you the whole thing on credit alone, no matter what the odds still outstanding. Blonde, really named Stephanie Riska, works for Hessen, lives at 120 Farragut, *never* chews gum—all the rest of it. Come on. My theory in a pinch would be she was jumped from behind outside the door of that vacant flat before she had a chance to cry out, spirited up over this roof, down through the next house, and into a waiting car—while you hugged the vestibule below. Calhoun, call in and have someone get out there fast to Hessen's house, Myrtle Drive, and keep it spotted until we can get

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there. I want to take another crack at that office first."

On the way over I gasped, "D'you think they—?"

"Naw, not yet," he reassured me. "Or they would have done it right in the empty flat and let you take the rap." Whether he meant it or not I couldn't tell, so it didn't relieve me much.

The second knot came out in the office. I went over the little table she'd used, while he turned the filing cabinets inside out. Again our two discoveries came almost simultaneously. "Look!" I breathed. It was stuck in a crack in the floor, hidden by the shadow of the table. A gilt hairpin she must have dropped one time at her work. Such as no brunette like the one Hessen had showed us at his house would have ever used in her life. "Blonde, all right," he grunted, and tipped me to his own find. "I muffed this before, in my hurry: about every third name in this card index of 'clients' has a foreign mailing address. Countries like Switzerland and Holland. Why should they be interested in social items appearing in papers over here? The mere fact that they're not living here shows the items couldn't possibly refer to them personally. If you ask me, the guy's an espionage agent of some kind, and these 'clippings' are some kind of a code. With a scattering of on-the-level ones to cover up. But that's a job for the F.B.I. I'm only interested in this girl of yours. My lieutenant can notify their local office about the rest of it, if he sees fit.

"The second leg of my theory," he went on, as we beat it out of there fast, "is she found out something, and they figured she was too dangerous to them. Did she say anything to you like that?"

"Not a word. But she had told him she was quitting end of next week to get married."

"Well, then she *didn't* find out anything, but he *thought* she did, so it amounted to the same thing. He could not afford to let her quit. And did he cover up beautifully, wiping out her existence! They only slipped up on that package. Maybe some tenant came up on the roof to take down her wash before they could come back and pick it up, so they had to leave it there, rather than risk being identified later. Come on, we'll stop off at that rooming house on the way—I want that landlady picked up. She's obviously one of them, since he recommended the girl there as a lodger in the beginning. Changed the whole room around, even to sticking a wad of tutti-frutti gum on the washstand."

"Let's go," I cried.

A second knot came out at the rooming house, but it was simply a duplicate of the one at her office: confirmation of the color of her hair. "A girl shampoos her hair once in a while," he said to me, and stuck a matchstick down the drain of the washbasin. He spread something on a piece of paper, showed

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it to me: two unmistakably blonde hairs. "Now why didn't I think of that the first time?" He turned the landlady over to a cop to be sent in, and we were on our way again—this time out to the Myrtle Drive house, fast.

There was no sign of the guy he'd sent out ahead of us to keep it cased, and he swore under his breath, while my heart deflated. The place was dark and lifeless, but neither of us was foolish enough to believe they'd gone to bed yet. He took the front door and I took the back, with a gun he furnished me—he was on my side now, all the way. We blew the locks simultaneously and met in the middle of the hall that ran through the place. In three minutes we were downstairs again. Nothing was disturbed, but the birds had flown; suave Hessen, and the butler, and the pinch-hitting brunette. No incriminating papers, but a very incriminating short-wave set. Incriminating because of the place in which it was located. It was built into the overhead water tank of a dummy toilet, not meant to hold water or be used. Gilman made the discovery in the most natural way possible.

"Spy ring, all right," he grunted, and phoned the F. B. I. then and there from the place itself.

That wasn't getting me back Steffie. I was in such a blue funk that I didn't notice it as soon as I should have; I mean, something had seemed to tickle my nostrils unpleasantly the whole time we were in there. It only registered *after* I came out into the open again with him, and we stood there crestfallen in front of it. Before I could call his attention to it, headlights slashed through the dark and a car drew up in front.

We crouched back, but it was only the spotter who was supposed to have been there before. Gilman rushed him with a roar. "What the hell's the idea? You were supposed to—"

"I tailed 'em!" the guy insisted. "They piled into a car, locked up the house, and lit. I tailed 'em the whole way—those were the only orders I got!"

"Where'd they go?"

"Pier 7, North River. They boarded some kind of tramp steamer, and it shoved off in less than a quarter of an hour later. I tried to reach you at Head—"

"Was there a blonde girl with them?" Gilman rapped out.

"No, just the three that were in the house when I first made contact—the two men and a dark-haired girl."

Meanwhile, eight of my heart's lives had died, and its ninth was wearing thin. "They're out of our reach now," I groaned. "We'll never—"

"Oh, no, they're not," Gilman promised viciously. "They may have cleared the pier but a police launch can pull them off again at Quarantine." He spilled into the house again, to phone in the alarm.

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I went after him; that was when I again noticed that unpleasant tickling. I called his attention to it when he got through on the wire. "Don't it smell as though they've had this place fumigated or some—"

He twitched the end of his nose. Then his face got drab. "That's gasoline!" he snapped. "And when you smell it that heavy—indoors like this—it's not a good sign!" I could tell he was plenty scared all at once—which made me twice as scared as he was. "Bill!" he hollered to the other guy. "Come in here fast and give us a hand! That girl they *didn't* take with them must be still around these premises someplace, and I only hope she isn't—"

He didn't finish it; he didn't have to. He only hoped she wasn't dead yet. I wasn't much good to them, in the sudden mad surge of ferreting they blew into. I saw them dimly, rustling around, through a sick haze.

He and I had been over the house once already—the upper part of it—so they found the right place almost at once. The basement. A hoarse cry from Gilman brought me and the other guy down after him. I couldn't go all the way, went into a paralysis halfway down the stairs. She was wedged out of sight between two trunks, loosely covered over with sacking. I saw them lifting her up between them, and she seemed awfully inert.

"Tell me now," I said, "don't wait until—"

"She's alive, kid," Gilman said. Then he broke off, said to the other guy, "Don't stop to look at her now, hurry up out of here! Don't you hear that ticking down around here some place? Don't you know what that gasoline reek means?"

I was alive again. I jumped in to help them, and we got her up and out of the cursed place fast—so fast we were almost running with her.

We untied her out by the car. She was half dead with fright, but they hadn't done anything to her, just muffled her up. The other guy wanted to go back in again and see if they could locate the bomb, but Gilman stopped him. "You'll never make it, it'll blow before you—"

He was right. In the middle of what he was saying, the whole house seemed to lift a half foot above its foundations; it lit up inside, there was a roar, and in a matter of minutes flame was mushrooming out of all the lower-story windows.

"An incendiary bomb," Gilman said. "Turn in a fire alarm, Bill, that's about all we can do now." He went off some place to use a phone, and when he came back later, he had a mean face—a face I wouldn't have wanted to run up against on a dark night. I thought he'd heard bad news. He had—but not for us. "They got 'em," he said. "Yanked 'em off it just as the tub was clearing the Narrows. They're earmarked for the F. B. I.—She *is* pretty at that, kid."

She was sitting there in the car by now, talking to me and crying

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a little. I was standing on the outside of it. I was standing up, that was my mistake.

"Well, I gotta go," I heard him say. And then something hit me. It felt like a cement mixer.

Our roles changed. When my head cleared, she was the one bending over me, crooning sympathetically. "—and he said to tell you, No hard feelings, but when anyone socks Dick Gilman on the head with a walking stick, they get socked back even if they're the best of friends. And he said he'd see us both down at Headquarters later in the night, to be sure and get there on time if we don't want to miss the fun."

I was still seeing stars, but I didn't care; I was seeing her too. And now it was only twelve days off—we'd licked the thirteenth.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES MERGENDAHL**

TITLE: ***It Could Happen to Anyone***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *His wife was standing against the back wall of the garage, waiting for him to drive the car in; but the incline was slippery and the tires worn . . . it could have happened to anyone.*

FROM THE NORTH WINDOW OF THE hospital's second-floor corridor, Mr. Willis could see a car swing sharply onto the slippery driveway. That would be Dr. Moody, a fine surgeon who'd do everything he could. "Everything possible," Mr. Willis said aloud. But his voice trailed away as he jerked back from the window and stumbled down the corridor past the operating room, where his wife lay white and broken.

Now he was at the south end again. There was a lake outside with rowboats to rent, and sometimes he had taken Bella for a row out there in the moonlight. It had been very quiet — except for the frogs sometimes, and the little trickle of water when Bella trailed her fingers. But it was wrong to think in the past. For he would take Bella for other rows, make other love in other nights to come, and —

Dr. Moody hurried up the stairs on his short legs. He was smiling as always. "Mr. Willis, I'll do everything I can, and in the meantime try not to think about it," he said. He shook Mr. Willis's hand, then turned on his stubby legs and waddled toward the operating room.

"Try not to think about it," the doctor had said. But what else was there to think, when it was printed there so clearly in his mind — how he'd taken his wife to the movies late this same afternoon, and how it had been dark when they'd finally turned into the driveway of their house. She had got out and taken mail from the box by the side of the road. She'd handed it to him and then walked on

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down the driveway while he'd sat in the car for a moment, looking over his mail by the dim light of the dashboard. He'd put the letters beside him and driven on down the incline that led to the garage, which was attached to the house by a breezeway. The incline was icy — for the first time he could remember.

And then the headlights had shown her at the back of the garage, waiting for him to come in with the key and open the door that led into the breezeway. The car was foreign and expensive — Mr. Willis's one indulgence — but the tires were worn, all the same. The car had skidded on the incline and had moved fast into the garage, going faster and faster, while his wife's face became suddenly twisted in horror —

"Something else," Dr. Moody had said. "Think about something else." Something pleasant, like the sound of the paddles dipped in water, Mr. Willis thought, and Bella's laugh and their secret words and the way she'd leaned back, with her throat so white in the darkness. He must think about these good moments, and not of his wife's limp form when he'd lifted her gently from the cold cement.

Hours went by — it seemed like hours — while Mr. Willis walked along the hospital corridor, noticing the design of the linoleum, stepping only on the brown squares, remembering suddenly how, when he was very small, he had avoided stepping on cracks in the sidewalk.

He was skipping from one square to another — a white, then a brown, then a white again — when Dr. Moody came out of the operating room. He was slapping a rubber glove against his thigh, but he was walking jerkily and he was not smiling any more. "If you'll come into my office, Mr. Willis," he said.

They walked down the corridor together, and Mr. Willis caught himself mixing up his squares, touching brown ones and white ones at the same time.

In the doctor's office Mr. Willis sat in a leather chair facing the desk, and Dr. Moody sat behind the desk and tapped a pencil on the glass top.

"Mr. Willis, perhaps the most difficult thing a doctor ever has to do —" He paused. The pencil stopped tapping, and then it began beating faster and faster until it became a hammer in Mr. Willis's head. And far away was Dr. Moody's voice saying, "You understand, Mr. Willis. It could happen to anyone. A very tragic accident."

The hammering began to fade. "Tragic accident," Mr. Willis said. "Yes, it could happen to anyone." He stood up, wavered, and sat down again.

"If there were only someone I could call for you. Some relative, perhaps."

"My wife's cousin. She lives here, but —" He shook his head slowly. "No, it might shock her too much to find out that way. I'll have to tell her myself, and —" He put his head into his hands. "I'll be all right. I'm trying. I'll be all right."

There was silence for a long time.

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Then, when Mr. Willis had gained control of himself, he stood up slowly and leaned against the arm of the leather chair. "Funny," he said. "It's a foreign car, you see. A sports car, but the tires are worn, and tonight's the only night it's ever been slippery. And I read my mail, you see, and forgot to give her the key to the breezeway." He was looking past the doctor's head, out the window toward the lake and the cold darkness. He had said the same words a hundred times; on the telephone when he'd called the hospital, in his own mind during the long drive, following the ambulance. He could not seem to stop saying it. "It was all right when we went to the movies. Just wet, you know. A good picture, too. Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck and —"

"Mr. Willis!"

"Yes, I mustn't think about it," he said. He stumbled toward the door, and the doctor walked beside him as they went back down the corridor.

"Your wife's cousin," Dr. Moody said. "She might be some comfort."

"No, I'll — I'll tell her later. Don't want to upset her."

"That's very considerate of you."

They were walking slowly along the corridor. Before them was the south window, the lake outside, bleak and cold with the frogs no longer there. "We used to rent a boat," Mr. Willis said. "She'd trail her fingers in the water and she'd look so white and — we will again, too. Only it will be even better, and —"

The doctor was worried. He said, "You've got to understand about your wife. You've got to realize it."

"There were always frogs, croaking all the time. And they will again, next summer and the summer after that." He started, laughed in one short burst, and said, "All right, be all right." Then he turned and went down the stairs and out into the freezing night.

Outside he paused, listened, and heard the croak of a bullfrog. He shook his head and heard it again, louder now, and suddenly he began to run toward his car while the lone frog multiplied into a hundred, then a thousand, then a million frogs, all croaking, all taunting him together. "Bella," he said aloud. "I'm sorry, Bella, I'm sorry, darling." But the croaking frogs were not entirely gone until the hospital was far behind him, and he was driving the five long miles toward home.

Mr. Willis had driven that five miles out from town to his house a thousand times, and the last time his wife had been beside him. She had said, "I don't like movies like that any more."

He had said, "I always like Audrey Hepburn."

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

"There must be some reason."

"Must there? Must there?" He was angry then. "Can't a man just like somebody — even *love* somebody — without a special reason?"

There had been silence, long and awkward, and he'd known then that

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he should never have been angry . . .

Mr. Willis decided once again that he must not think about it any more. He would try to figure out why he'd heard the croaking of frogs back there at the hospital. He had been remembering those beautiful nights, he supposed. And that, of course, was all he should ever remember now — Bella and the beautiful nights. So he thought of Bella and the beautiful nights. And he whispered, "Bella," into the windshield. Then louder, "Bella — Bella!" And he was nearly screaming toward the end. "I love you, Bella! I love you, Bella!"

And then suddenly the house loomed up before him, and suddenly he was turning into the driveway, shooting fast over the frozen ground, warning himself that the tires were smooth and it was still slippery as he made the final turn onto the incline that led to the garage. He felt the car skidding and slammed on the brakes. The headlights were pointing directly into the garage, and there before him was a strange man, standing exactly where his wife had stood those hours before. He was smoking a cigarette, looking straight into the headlights, with his back pressed flat against the wall.

Mr. Willis closed his eyes. He heard the skidding sound of rubber on concrete, felt the car jar — and stop.

Then a voice spoke beside him. It said, "Six feet to go. Had me worried there for a minute. But still six feet to go." The man was bulky. His face was white and looked carved out of stone. He smiled — a crack in a stone wall. "All right, Mr. Willis," he said.

Mr. Willis stepped out of the car and unlocked the door to the breezeway and walked beside the bulky man toward the house.

"Nice car," the man said pleasantly. "I always liked a foreign sports car." Then he said, "You understand, Mr. Willis? The skid marks stop exactly six feet from the spot where she was standing. After that, only tire marks from a rolling car, Mr. Willis. A *rolling* car." He paused and shivered in the cold. "A good try though, Mr. Willis. A very good try."

Mr. Willis started to answer. He had said the words before. "If I hadn't forgotten to give her the key," he began, "if I hadn't sat there reading my mail —" He talked on, and then suddenly he stopped. He knew now — finally he knew that she was dead and it was over. Everything was over. There'd be no more love in the long summer nights, no more softness of lips against his own. He spoke quietly: "Bella — I'm sorry, Bella."

The bulky man frowned. "Bella?" he said. "I thought your wife's name was Katherine. They told me Katherine, down at the station."

Mr. Willis smiled. "My wife's cousin," he said. "Her name is Bella." But of course it was useless to think of Bella now. Useless to think of the warm secret they had shared, useless to think of the flat-bottomed boat and Bella's trailing white fingers and the dream of the days to come . . .

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Vinnie Williams, who wrote that memorable story, "Dodie and the Boogerman," now gives you another unusual tale. It is the story of a dog — not, mind you (as the author pointed out to us), of a little person disguised as a dog. The "catch dog" is an animal of a certain nature and certain training, with a dog's limited vision and brain — at least, that is what Miss Williams intended; but symbolically we can perhaps interpret the catch dog as a protector, an avenger, even as a detective . . . Although you will meet feuding ranchers, and cattle and water problems, you will not be reading a Western story. In a comparable sense, this story might be called a Southern — a type of story which Miss Williams writes with consummate skill, and with nature details so true that they hurt.

We have never received a letter from Miss Williams that did not cry out, at least in part, for quotation. She always has something interesting to say, and always says it inimitably. For example, she wrote to your Editors that she finished "The Catch Dog" just in time: "They're having camp meeting this week out in the woods, eight miles from here, and I'm going. This is my first camp meeting, though I've lived in the rural south most of my life. There is a big tabernacle and people camping in tents and prayer meeting mornings and nights and, of course, sings; and I'm due to help cook dinner one night. Don't let anyone tell you that Southern cooking is bad — the black-eyed pea soup, the whole roast quail, the yam puff, the Gabriel cake — well, as they say around here, they are just invitations to hog off."

Well, as we've said before: Oh, can that woman write!

THE CATCH DOG

by VINNIE WILLIAMS

THE MARSH RABBIT SAW THE GREAT red dog too late and convulsed to escape, eyes starting in terror. The huckleberry bushes on the banks of the creek shook violently. There was a squeal cut short.

After his meal the dog lay under the bushes, flews resting on his paws. Dusk softened the countryside, thin scrub land bristly with palmetto and sand pine. Southward, the scrub gave way to the Florida savannahs covered with sawgrass and dotted with islands of live oak and coco plum. Below that was the spilth and decay of the custard apple bottoms of Lake Okeechobee.

The dog gnawed a sandspur in

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his paw, eyes half closed. He was a cur, but hound blood was evident in his well-domed head and the full hard pads of his feet. Across one russet shoulder was the scar of a cattle whip. It was nearly healed, pink and hairless, but even now dim memory made the dog's chops wrinkle sullenly. A hundred miles north on a ranch, the man who had used the whip would have a crippled hand until the day he died.

The creek plashed down to a river, and the meat lay warm in the dog's lean belly. He slept. He woke to luminous night and footsteps stumbling toward him through the underbrush.

The runner breasted a wall of fetter-bush. He was a boy not more than sixteen, the flesh growing untidily about his bones. One temple was patched with blood, and he paused swaying, breath hasseling. Then he dropped to his knees and crawled into a clump of bushes.

Sound mounted in the night. Horses' hoofs slogged on the sand trail. Three riders rounded a bend and reined up. They were oddly assorted, two young and slouch-backed and lantern-jawed, the third older, bigger, and swagbellied.

The oldest one said, "You sure you winged him, Les?"

"Sure, Pa. He was off to the edge of the pasture. I slung a shot and seen him grab his head." Les knucked a black punkin hat to the back of his head. "Who you reckon it was?"

"My God, you got to ask?"

The other young rider said with false commiseration, "Now, Pa, don't go throwing off on Les. You know he's never had no sense since he got dropped when he was a crawl-baby."

The first youth's hand darted to his gun. "You, Li'l Ed—"

The father swung his horse heavily between them. "Quit that. Lord," he complained querulously, "all the trouble I got, I got to keep you two roosters from killing each other . . . It was that Faircloth brat, that's who it was. Likely he was trying to find out what happened to those three riders of his Pa's."

Li'l Ed sniggered. "You ought to have seen them sell out across country, Pa, when I told them The Critter here didn't like them working for the Faircloths." He petted the rifle snubbed to his saddle.

The big man shifted in his seat. Now the dog saw something that wrinkled the skin from his teeth and caused lambent green flame in his eyes, the whip that hung coiled from the man's arm. Eighteen feet long and of plaited buckskin, it could take the tip off a balky steer's ear or flesh from a dog's shoulder as neatly as a knife.

Big Ed Searcy growled, "I told Adam Faircloth what would happen if he bought Heron Lake. I told him us Searcys was using it, but he went on and done it." His large head swung ominously. "Well, time I get thu with that sapsucker, he's going to wish that steer had killed

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him instead of just stoving him in."

Li'l Ed's eyes slanted sideways. "You could have bought the lake, Pa. You got offered first chance, but you went and bought that Brahman bull instead."

The big man grudged, "I never figured Adam Faircloth could scrape up the money for it, but he's broke now. And by the time I'm finished —come on."

Les said, "Where we going, Pa?"

"Let me tell him, Pa." Li'l Ed's voice took on unctuous overtones. "See, Les-boy, old Adam's got 5000 acres of pasture he needs bad leased from Bart Benson and payment due this week. He's got thirty calves collected in his east pasture, and he's fixing to sell them to Bart. You see that thing tied to Pa's saddle. Now that's what we call a wire-cutter—"

Les exploded like a puffball, his hand darting, but Big Ed smothered the movement with an iron hand. Les fought blindly to free himself sobbing, "Leave go, Pa, I'm going to kill that—"

His father swung a thick arm. Les's head snapped back, his hat falling under the jittering horses' hoofs.

"Stop it, hear? And you, Li'l Ed, shut your mouth. My Lord, someday I'm going to tie your tails together and sling you over a clothesline. Right now we got a job of fence cutting. Come on now—and keep apart."

They rode off, and the boy in the bushes knelt watching them out of sight. He mumbled, "Got to get to Pa. Got to tell him—" The creek rippled in the shadows. "A little drink first—" He started forward and fell within fingertip-reach.

The dog tilted his head. He had never been a pet. He had been a drive-and-catch dog earning his food by herding cattle. But now in the dim fronds of his brain, something stirred.

Stiffly, one step, two steps, he approached the unconscious boy, flanged nostrils reaching. Here were scents he could read—the smell of horses and cattle, the distasteful stench of pomade used to subdue and darken hair as yellow and curly as hawkweed, the scent of dog. The last clung to the worn denim jacket and a few white hairs glinted on a sleeve.

The dog inhaled deeply, and—he did not know why—a whine prickled his throat. This was the time he liked best to travel, when the sun swollen with heat had disappeared into the Gulf and small animals stirred forth on feathered feet. But he did not move.

He lay immobile through the night, eyes seldom leaving the boy. Once, distant rutting hogs fought, and he came to his feet, body interposed between the sound and the boy. When the sound faded, he sank down, his eyes slitted with puzzlement.

Banks of pearl were piled in the east when the boy stirred. He started to sit up and groaned, a hand go-

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ing to his bruised and aching head.

"What—" Fingers touched the scab. His thin jaw knotted with memory. "Pa—the calves—I got to tell—"

A woodpecker, hitching and rapping his way up a pine, whirled away in alarm as the boy fought bushes, going toward the sand trail. The dog waited a moment and then followed at a silent, slanting trot.

A half hour later they came to a rambling, sun-silvered ranch house surrounded by taut fences and well-tended pastures. A man stood on the verandah propped between crutches. He was tall and gray-gaunt, his eyes narrow and blue as the thin line of the horizon.

He called harshly, "Jess—Jess boy, you all right?"

"Sure, Pa." The boy sprang forward and dragged around a chair of peeled cypress. "Sit down, Pa. You know what the doc said."

Adam Faircloth slurred off the hand. "If I'd paid any attention to that bone-snatcher, I'd be dead now. I want to know what happened. When your horse came in alone—"

"I was out looking for Bo again—I figured he might be hanging around that hound bitch of the Searcy's—and Les took a shot at me. It didn't hurt none, but it sure knocked the sense out of me. But, Pa, I got to tell you—the Searcys are figuring on cutting our fence and scattering the calves—"

The other swung himself around awkwardly. "You had anything to eat yet, boy? I'll fix you something."

The boy said with bitter knowledge. "They already done it." The small maturity that had stiffened his face when he spoke of Les's shot dissolved. He yelled in boyish fury, "I'm going to kill him, Pa! I'm going to kill Big Ed if I got to get killed myself!"

Adam Faircloth snapped, "Your mother would like that, wouldn't she?"

"She'd like it better than to see the ranch gone, because no one had the guts to fight for it!"

Muscles knotted in the older man's cheeks. He and the boy stared at each other. The boy's mouth was clamped stubbornly, his eyes so blurred with fury that he didn't recognize the sudden pain in his father's face.

"So that's what you think of me, eh, boy?" his father said slowly. "You think that auto accident that took your ma took my guts too. That what you think?"

The boy retorted defiantly, "It looks that way, don't it?"

Adam Faircloth said slowly, "'The fool eateth his own flesh.' . . . I got more to lay on Big Ed than you do, boy, but we won't get nowhere trying to kill him except to Raiford."

The boy burst out, "My God, Pa, what more you going to stand still for? Ma's dead and you're crippled, because he won't fence his range and one of his steers run across the road in front of our car.

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You buy Heron Lake because we need it so bad, and Big Ed with half a dozen sloughs cuts our fences and runs off our calves, so we can't pay our pasture rent. How much more you going to take?"

His father said patiently, "Boy, we don't have any real proof that Big Ed cut our fences, just something you heard. Big Ed and those boys of his would deny it, and you know the sheriff jumps when Big Ed says frog. We got to wait until we get proof. Look, boy, you'll feel better after some breakfast. I'll fry you some ham—"

The boy said bitterly, "You got the stomach to swallow Big Ed's doings. I don't. I'm going to round up those calves."

He swung away heading for the corral. His father called, "Jess, it won't do no good. You got to have two-three men, you know that good as I do. Jess!"

The boy tried hard to round up the calves. The dog watched from behind a screen of tea bushes, head tilted critically. Panting and cursing, the boy wheeled his horse here and there and tried to drive the calves back through the hole in the fence, but they easily eluded him in the thick scrub.

Two hours work netted him four calves. Abruptly he drew his foam-caked horse to a halt and dropped his head on the sweaty mane, and thin boyish sobs wrenched his shoulders.

Finally he smeared his eyes dry on a sleeve and slowly turned back toward the ranch.

This time the dog did not follow. He had work to do. He picked out a black and white calf and descended on it like a whirlwind. The calf blatted with fright and tried to dive into a clump of oak, but the dog was before it, teeth snapping, turning it back toward the hole in the fence.

Forty-five minutes later all the calves had been driven into the far end of the pasture, and the weary dog was "holding" them. For this is one of the laws of the catch dog: you did not bark or bite needlessly, you did not approach a man leading a bull on a nose-ring, you "held" a herd if the fence was broken.

He did it from a distance, so as not to alarm the calves and cause them to explode into a dozen different directions. He was always there, the sun striking sparks from his red coat when the calves glanced up from their grazing.

Later his prick ears caught the sound of a truck engine, and he slid silently into the underbrush.

The boy drove the stock truck, long arms wrapped around the steering wheel, eyes fixed ahead.

He said sullenly, "No use trying to get new riders in Lemon Town. You know good and well Big Ed's going to have everyone scared to work for us."

His father tried to lift the bar between them with an attempt at humor. "Maybe there'll be a stranger

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there who never heard of Big Ed."

"We need two-three riders, or we just as good lay down and let them bury us—" The car bucked. "Pa," he burst out, animosity forgotten, "the calves!"

Adam Faircloth said on a reverent breath, "Lord God."

"They're back in the pasture, bunched up like they been herded. Who do you reckon—I don't see any horse tracks."

His father was kicking his door impatiently with a crutch. "Don't question miracles, boy. Grab that roll of wire from under the seat and mend that break. Then get your horse and get busy catching those calves."

An hour later when the truck was loaded and gone, the dog rose and quartered the wind. Dampness came from the east, and he followed it to a small pond where he drank deeply. An incautious fox squirrel, intent on a grasshopper, darted down a willow.

The red dog napped after his meal and awoke to twilight and the low liquid bubbling of a Billy-owl. He rose and stretched yawning, closing his jaws with a click. He considered and made a cast. Picking up the scent of horses, he followed it at a jog.

Two hours later his nose had told him more about the Searcy ranch than if he could have read its half-illiterate account books. He knew that there were more cattle than on the boy's ranch, but carelessly tended —their salt and mineral boxes were low or empty. He knew the buildings were unkept, a miasma of decay hanging over them. He knew that there was a hound bitch who had recently been visited by the boy's dog.

He picked up the scent by the hound's kennel and followed it to a patch of woods. There he found the body, a small white fice, bench-legged with a grinning mouth and doughnut tail. It had been shot. The red dog backed away stiffly.

The dog-star was brilliant in the heavens when the Searcys rode in from a fox-hunt. The hound scented an intruder and yawped an invitation, straining at her chain.

Les said, "Hey, ole Belle's still raring to go, Pa."

Li'l Ed's brows rose in vast surprise. "Now how did you figure that out, boy? . . . Pa, you suppose it was true what Bart Benson told us, that he saw Adam Faircloth driving toward Arcadia with a truck load of calves?"

Big Ed Searcy swung heavily from his sagging mare. "Yeah, some way he got them rounded up, but it don't matter." He was calm with the thick dangerous calm of a black bear watching an intruder at the cave mouth. "I got something better cooked up for Adam Faircloth. A little fire, boys. Nothing like a fire to clear your range of worthless underbrush."

The two younger men's lips drew

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back pleasurably. Li'l Ed asked, "When, Pa?"

"Tomorrow night. The moon will be down to a nubbin then. Here's how we'll do." As he spoke, he coiled the black whip and hung it on a porch peg. The hair on the dog's neck roached. "We'll invite the sheriff and Bart Benson and a couple others over for poker and to see the Brahman. Halfway through the evening, you and Li'l Ed pretend to be drunk and go upstairs to bed. Only you'll crawl out the window and light a shuck over to the Faircloth ranch." A big paw wiped his mouth, savoring pleasure. "You get back in the house up the oak tree, and then if any questions are asked, why, you were passed out and don't know a thing."

They went in the house taking the hound, and by and by lights blinked out. Only then did the dog move. He trotted over to where Big Ed had stood and sniffed, then lifted a contemptuous leg.

A vagrant scent tickled his nose, and he traced it to the barn and snuffed deeply at a crack. It was a cattle odor, yet not cattle odor, and the sounds within were new to him.

He was as curious as his ancestor who had followed Noah down the still-damp slopes of Mount Ararat. He circled the barn trying to get in, but it was closed, so he trotted back the way he came.

He found the pie plate under the boy's back steps. It was battered, and an effluvia of food clung about it. He nosed it out delicately.

Once he had had such a plate. When he was a puppy, it had meant an extension of his mother's warm furry side. A working dog, it had been his just due at the end of the day. Now he sniffed the plate and picked it up and trotted away with it. Earlier he had found the white fice's hide-hole, a cool depression under the hydrangeas beside the house. He took the plate there and lay down, chops across it.

The sun had burned a hole in the middle of the sky when the boy and his father returned from Lemon Town. The boy swung down from the truck and went stiff-legged as a fighting cock to help his father. The closeness of the two bodies, one twig-dry and helpless, the other withy and quick, did nothing to dissolve the tension.

"What good's a peace bond?" the boy burst out as if the sight of the ranch had opened some dam. "You can put peace bonds on Big Ed till the cows come home, and that won't keep him from scaring off riders from working for us."

"Maybe not, Jess, but now if he tries anything, we got a better chance of stopping him." Pain and bone-weariness edged the older man's voice. "If I thought it would do any good," he said half to himself, dragging up the steps of the ranch, "I'd give him back the lake, bad as we need it, but it wouldn't. If it was just the two boys—"

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"You'd give up the lake we need to that sapsucker." The boy's voice was flat and wordlessly accusing. He stared at his father for a minute, then abruptly turned and ran toward the barn. His father watched him go, and his shoulders slumped between the crutches.

As a wolf sometimes clings to a certain stone or a dog to a ball or stick, carrying it for no obvious reason, so the red dog clung to the pie plate. It was with him when he drank at the pond and later when he killed the pine-vole. It brushed the bushes as he trotted toward the Searcy ranch.

Tonight the barn door was open. That curious noise could be investigated. The dog drifted in silently.

There was a bull stanchioned in a stall, but like no bull the dog had ever herded. It was gray and humpbacked and slant-eyed. Catching sight of the dog, it swung horns like scythes, the ring in its nose twinkling.

The dog regarded the bull gravely, head tipped to one side, pie-plate nipped in his teeth.

The hound stirred in her kennel. Her nose caught his scent, and she bounced out to the length of her chain, barking. The dog dropped the pie plate, started toward her, then froze.

The back door had swung open, and Les was squinting into the yard.

"Don't see nothing, Pa. Reckon Belle scented a varmint."

Big Ed growled, "Well, shut the door. The skeeters are so thick, you could swing a pint cup and catch a quart." A chair scraped. "I hear horses. Looks like the sheriff's a little early. Get out the bottle, Les."

Later the dog raised his nose from the hound's ticked stern, ears pricking. High up on the house two figures were crawling out of a window. A tree rustled unnaturally. The men dropped to the ground and hurried to an oak grove where they mounted horses and rode off.

The dog rose. The hound whined petulantly. He touched a placating nose to hers and lay down. Shortly afterwards the back door opened, and Big Ed turned his head over his shoulder. "You boys come out when you finish that hand. You're going to see a he-man bull."

Silently the red dog faded out of sight behind the kennel. The hound whined, then barked commandingly. Big Ed cursed and aimed a foot at her, and she dodged, head and tail low. A snarl bubbled in the red dog's throat, and when the man rolled ponderously into the barn, he padded after.

Big Ed walked directly to the bull and slid a steel bar into the nose ring. He unfastened the stall and led the bull out. The bull came sulkily, gray dewlap swinging.

Backstepping, the rancher's heel caught the pie plate. It slapped his ankle. Cursing he turned and kicked it, and the plate spun across the

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barn, clattering against the wall.

Again earned food was snatched from the red dog; again a whip laid open his shoulder. With a roar, the dog came at Big Ed with reaching claws and earnest fangs. The man yelled and sprang back. The bull bawled and flung up his head. The iron bar flew free, and the nose ring half tore through the tender cartilage of the bull's nose, driving him wild with pain.

Blood flew like spume as the bull lowered his head and charged.

The poker players came on a run at the uproar, and their swart faces blanched at what they saw. It was some time before they could get Big Ed Searcy out of the barn, and then it was too late.

The red dog slept that night under the hydrangea bush, feet kicking lightly in chase. He roused to morning and the thin pop of ham browning in a pan, the clatter of a receiver replaced on a phone.

Adam Faircloth swiveled on his crutches. "Well, the sheriff finally got home. He said he'd be over to pick up Les and Li'l Ed as soon as he gets breakfast. Says he's got something to tell us."

"Wonder what," the boy said absently. Somewhere in the night watches, the barrier between father and son had washed away. He said slowly, "Pa, I just thought of something. I don't know why I didn't think of it before—but how come you were in the stables with a gun in time to catch Li'l Ed and Les?"

His father humped himself over to the kitchen door and looked across the sun-washed yard. "You know, boy, it looks like it's going to be a real good day—"

The boy said, knowing, "You were fixing to sneak off and shoot Big Ed, weren't you, Pa?"

Adam Faircloth turned. He said steadily, "I knew it was a fool thing. I knew it wouldn't do no good—but I had it to do. I couldn't stand the way you looked at me."

"Pa." The boy's thin throat closed up. Then his gaze discovered something, and he cried in gratitude, "Pa, look at that red dog crawling out from under the hydrangeas. He's got Bo's plate in his mouth."

"Well, darn if he hasn't." His father cleared his throat. "What do you know about that, almost like he was asking for rations."

The boy said slowly, "Pa, I got a feeling Bo—won't be coming back. This dog looks like a stray. Could we keep him?"

"Sure, boy, sure. Say, he's a handsome something, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but I'll probably have a time training him to keep out from under the stock's feet, just like Bo." He snapped his fingers calling, "Hey, you worthless old good-looking dog, you! Come on over here."

The dog considered the beckoning hand gravely, then trotted over and dropped the plate by the steps. Cattle lowed in the distance.

His plate, *his* hydrangea bush, *his* cattle . . .

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

C. E. Parker's "Like a Plum Ripening" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. For a "first story" it is unusually restrained and disciplined, and the emotional relationships which it projects are extremely well done, with strong and convincing implications.

The author writes that "her background is pretty dull." Isn't it true that most of us consider our lives either dull or ones of "quiet desperation"? Yet can a background be really dull that produces as interesting and perceptive a story as, say, "Like a Plum Ripening"? We wonder . . . At the time she wrote this story, the author was 38, a graduate of Los Angeles City College where she majored in advertising and publicity. She was living on a poultry ranch with her husband and two children. It is perhaps pertinent to mention that the author and her husband had an arrangement to supply black widow spiders to a man in San Diego at an agreed price of $1 each; what the man did with the spiders is unknown — indeed, the author didn't even want to know!

It is even more pertinent to mention that the Parkers never employed a bracero *on their poultry farm . . .*

LIKE A PLUM RIPENING

by C. E. PARKER

VI PUSHED THE EGG-CART SLOWLY along the dusty path between the cages. A hen in the pen she was approaching started beating its wings and making for the far end, which started the whole bunch clucking and whirring. Down by the concrete egg-and-feed room the *bracero* Manuel looked up at the noise. Vi was trying to make her egg gathering last until Manuel had started feeding. But from the way Manuel was fiddling, she suspected he was stalling, too.

Darn Hal, she thought. This gentleman's poultry farm was his idea, but half the time when the egg gathering had to be done he was off practicing on the pistol range with his pals in the border patrol. She stopped before the next nest and let down the door. There was one broody old hen still there. With her beak she had laboriously collected all the eggs in a pile and was sitting on them.

"Sorry, sis," Vi said, shoving the hen gently over. "You need a rooster

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for that sort of thing. Even then you can't be sure," she added, thinking of Hal.

The hen stood off and watched Vi peckishly as she removed all the eggs in view and stuck her hand deep in the rice hulls searching for more. It was silly, but this always made her nervous. Suppose, she thought, I should encounter something that is not an egg. Say a scorpion. She never had, but just suppose.

This was the last nest, so she looked around for some other little job to keep her busy and noticed a hen that needed to be removed for its own safety. One show of blood on a hen and the other birds would peck away at the injury until the hen died from loss of blood. Generations of these birds had been bred hygienically and raised in pens, but they still reacted instinctively to get rid of a weak bird that might have meant danger to the pack. It made her shiver in the warm California sunshine.

There was nothing else in sight to do, so she headed for the egg-and-feed room. Manuel just wants to help me, she told herself; then, too, he must get lonesome.

Manuel politely opened the cooling room door for her. "Let me please unload for you, Mrs. Marshall," he said. "It is much too hot for you to work."

"Nonsense," she said, and reached for the first stack of flats. But he had beat her to it, and her hand closed over his brown one on the bottom stack. She quickly drew it away, but the contact set up a curious sensation in her mouth — a small sort of thrill in her front teeth, the kind she sometimes got stroking the cat.

She had drawn her hand away too quickly, too noticeably. Now she must stop to chat a bit, so that he would see there was nothing personal in it.

"How is the trailer coming along?" she asked. When they had decided to engage a Mexican contract worker, Hal had pulled in an old house trailer for him to sleep in, and Manuel spent his spare time fixing it up with bits of lumber they had around the place.

"I have the sleeping part, how do you call it — the paneling in. It makes an air space to be cooler. Would you like me to show it to you?"

"I'll look in on my way back to the house. You'd better get those birds fed. Mr. Marshall's books say if you don't feed them at the same time every day, they don't do so well." She spoke curtly because he was giving her his disconcerting look, a look that had a liquid quality which seemed to flow over and around her like a loving touch.

She started for the house, then turned. "*Gracias*, for unloading for me."

"*Nada*," he said, smiling at her and showing his strong white teeth.

Vi came to the trailer, hesitated, then went in and looked around. It was as neat as a pin. The old kitchen curtains she had given him livened up the windows. And the small table

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had a gay oilcloth he had bought himself. She went toward the sleeping compartment in the rear. He had it almost entirely enclosed with some wall-board they had torn out when they were enlarging the house. It made the interior very cozy.

She glanced to the top of the built-in cabinet. There was the picture she had seen before of Manuel's family in Mazatlán — a small dark man and a huge dark woman before a tiny plastered house with five little ones sitting in front in the dirt.

There was a new picture on the chest now, set prominently toward the front. She leaned forward to look at it. It was of Manuel, posing under a palm tree with a coconut in one hand and a machete in the other. At first she thought he was naked, but a closer look showed he was wearing a brief loin cloth. He was strongly built, with husky shoulders and a swimmer's chest. And long straight legs. It occurred to her that since she was the only person who ever came in the trailer besides Manuel that he must have put the picture there for her benefit. She blushed and turned quickly to leave.

Manuel was on the top step, just coming in.

His sudden appearance startled Vi. She spoke sharply, "Through so soon, Manuel?"

"Excuse me, please. I have forgotten the paddle for stirring the feed."

He reached across her to a counter, picked up the paddle, and put it in his rear pocket. But he remained stolidly in the doorway.

"The paneling looks very nice, Manuel. But I must go now. It's time to fix Mr. Marshall's dinner."

He still didn't move. "The *señora* works too hard. In my country such a beautiful woman would have servants to do the work. The *señora* would spend the day making herself even more beautiful — for the night and for her lover."

This is ridiculous, Vi thought. She started to walk out the door, swerving to one side to avoid him. She swayed a little too far, setting her foot imperfectly on the top step. Instantly, his strong hands caught her on either side of her waist. They held her a long moment, then released her. She walked toward the house, stumbling in her haste. I feel dizzy, she thought, like when I bend down too long in the sun in the garden and get up too fast.

That night at supper with Hal she said, striving for a casual tone, "Don't you think you leave me here alone too much with Manuel? Aren't the neighbors liable to talk?"

Hal looked up. "About *my* wife and a Mex? Don't be silly." He shoved a French roll in his mouth, then withdrew it suddenly to ask, "Has he been bothering you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, he'd better not. He makes a pass at you and I'd shoot him down like a dog. Any court in San Diego county would pin a medal on me. You just let me know."

Vi got up and started clearing the

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table. She paused before she left the room with a stack of dishes and looked at her husband. His head was bent over the sports page. The blond hairs on the back of his head stuck up in separate, aggressive bristles. She could see him pulling out his service revolver and shooting Manuel neatly and efficiently right in the middle of the forehead. It would be as natural for him as taking a drink of water.

She let the water run over the dishes in the sink. The sink window was open and in on the fresh evening breeze rode the faint strumming of a guitar, from the direction of the trailer. It blended with the oversweet scent of honeysuckle and overpowered her. All at once she felt physically ill.

The next morning the sun was warm over the valley by 7 o'clock. Hal ate a big breakfast and then took his .22 and walked off in the direction of Rattlesnake Canyon. There was nothing, he always said, like shooting at a moving object to keep your hand in. If he couldn't find a snake, there would be a rabbit or a hawk.

The morning sun seemed to clear Vi's mind — as though all the dark and hidden spots were turned out and hanging on a sunny clothesline. Just a touch of middle-age madness — what happened yesterday. The body playing tricks on the mind.

She baked an apple pie and started tidying up the house. The morning sun through the dining-room window picked out the tiny particles of dust on the table tops. While dusting the window sill, she moved back the fluffy white curtain to get to the corner. On the outside of the window, in the corner, was an untidy web, with a small egg sac suspended in the middle. She looked for the spider. It was above the egg sac, with a body that looked much too heavy for the web. It was the first time she had seen a black widow near the house, although the poultry ranch teemed with them at certain seasons.

Beautiful and deadly, Vi thought, as she looked at the spider, fascinated. The sun outlined the body with a gold opalescence, but the legs and bony parts were a deadly black. I'll have to tell Hal about this, she thought; he so loves to kill things. She left the spider reluctantly. If I were a witch doctor, she thought, a specimen like that would be money in the bank.

When she went out for the 10 o'clock egg gathering she felt almost gay. The sun was hot now, and it penetrated to the bone. After the cool house, it felt delicious.

She chattered nonsense to the hens. If they heard you coming, they didn't become so startled at the sight of you. The flats with their clean white eggs piled higher. She was turning the corner of the last cage when Manual rose abruptly before her from where he had been fiddling with a water pipe.

She stopped short, her breath piling up behind her nostrils. She forced herself to exhale slowly. Like the silly hens, she thought; if I'd heard him,

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the sight of him wouldn't have startled me so.

Manuel was just standing there, looking at her. His white T-shirt contrasted with his dark complexion and made him seem larger than life. He wasn't smiling, nor did his eyes have that liquid quality. He looked hungry, as though ever since he had last seen her this was what he had been waiting for — to see her again.

Deep down inside Vi, something seemed to stir. A warm turning over of old feelings. This is what being wanted can do to you, she thought. It strikes a spark. My spark hasn't been struck for so long, I had almost forgotten I had one.

She detoured carefully around him, not speaking. Her sun-dress felt sketchy. Yesterday was real, this was real — the body was stronger than the mind.

Manuel spoke to her. "Mrs. Marshall?"

"Yes, Manuel." She turned, but didn't look at him.

"Does Mr. Marshall go to the rifle meet in Los Angeles tomorrow?"

"I think so."

"Tomorrow night," he said, his voice scarcely more than a whisper, "I will play for you."

Vi stumbled through the rest of the egg-gathering like an automaton. This can't be happening to me, she told herself. I won't let it happen to me. This sinking, sinking feeling, as though I were drowning and couldn't put out a hand to save myself. Or wouldn't.

A small rage was building in her toward Manuel. If he would make an overt act, she could say no. But each subtle move he made toward intimacy was gauged perfectly to what was acceptable. Like a plum ripening on a tree, and when it falls who can blame the hand that is outstretched to receive it?

Sunday morning dawned clear and sunny. The bare hills that surrounded the valley wavered from the intervening heat. The chickens were clucking contentedly — a lulling murmur. But this morning Vi did not feel as she had the day before — as though her mind had been shaken out and were hanging in the sun. She recognized that feeling for what it was, part of the trap.

Hal was in his den, cleaning out the guns he was taking to the two-day match. He handled them delicately, and with respect — as a man should handle his wife.

Vi put on her blue jeans and boots. She paused at the den door.

"Did you see any snakes yesterday?"

He didn't stop his careful manipulations. "Couple of sleepy ones, not much of a target. I figured it was too hot. Next time I'll go out earlier."

"You find a nice gopher snake, you might bring him home. We need one for the garden."

He seemed interested. "Sure. Easiest thing you know. Catch them with one of those looped sticks I got for culling the chickens."

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"I'm going for a walk. If they come for you early, have a nice time."

She got the pole with the loop on the end and a heavy feed sack. She dampened the sack under a water faucet. Then she took the trail Hal had made with his big G.I. boots in his many trips to the canyon. Nobody was about, although that wasn't strange on Sunday morning. She walked for a while through a heavily scented eucalyptus grove. Then the trail led up, over a ridge that started to be rocky. Rattlesnake Canyon was all boulders, large and small, scattered helterskelter.

Now that she was here, she hardly knew how to start. She walked around the boulders cautiously, scaring an occasional lizard under a rock. Once she almost stepped on a boulder, before she saw that it was a huge, old land turtle.

She started looking on the cool side of the boulders. Some of the smaller ones she tipped over with her hand, then stepped back. Once, when she did this, the end of a snake's tail disappeared in a manzanita thicket.

She was in the shade of a huge boulder that was disintegrating into cracks and crevices before she found what she wanted. It was dark in the shadow of the boulder in contrast to the bright sunlight, so she heard it before she saw it. A dry quivery whir — *chick-chick, chick-chick*. She stopped still, but looked all around with her eyes. In the mosaic formed by the pebbling boulder it was hard to distinguish at first. Then it was all she could see — a taut, mottled figure S, motionless but watchful.

The rattle died down to a faint *chick, chick*. But the strong muscles held their striking position.

She drew back a few feet and carefully drew on her driving gloves. Then she took the culling stick in her right hand and picked up an old piece of manzanita with her left. It had a curve to it that favored her plan. She reached out and teased the rattler with the curved branch. He gave his whir briefly, then lunged at the stick. The loop caught him right below the head, and he writhed in a fury until she could maneuver her sack open and drop him in.

She walked briskly home, the sack held carefully away from her body.

Manuel had gone to 11 o'clock mass, and Hal was still in the den making love to his guns. Still wearing her driving gloves, she went to the shadiest rice-hull nest. She opened the nest door slightly at the top and eased the feed sack through and shook it until it felt light. Luckily the nests were tightly built, to keep out rodents.

One more little task — just to make sure, doubly sure. Still wearing her gloves, she took a shingle and went to the outside of the dining-room window, which was on the opposite side of the house from the den. She gently disengaged the spider web, careful to get the egg sac. The spider rode huddled up on the end of the shingle. She knew just the right place

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for this — an awkward-to-get-into nest that had a round door like a porthole, through which you had to extend your arm its full length to reach all the corners . . .

A little later, empty-handed, she returned to the house and took a shower. Then she put on a thin, yellow sun-dress, and brushed her hair until it shone.

Hal was sitting in the breakfast nook reading the sports page. He was shirtless and his chest was a distasteful white. She prepared the coffee, made some ham sandwiches, and put out the pie. She looked at her husband.

"I don't think I'll eat now," she told him. "It's too hot. I think I'll drive into town and go to a movie. I can grab a bite later." He hardly noticed her departure.

She got the car out and started slowly down the driveway. Manuel was walking in from the road. She smiled radiantly at him.

If she were not at home, Hal would gather the eggs himself before leaving with his friends.

She eased the car carefully into the Sunday traffic and headed for town.

NEXT MONTH . . .

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Elizabeth Anthony's "The Seventh Murder of Henry's Father" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. For a "first story" it is a surprisingly original variation, and with a real fillip; although the story seems to read leisurely, it is sharp and shrewd in its observation . . . Elizabeth Anthony's earliest attempt at a writing career began with a family newspaper when she was only eight years old. She pecked out the first edition on a battered old typewriter in the playroom, and on the strength of that edition she sold a full year's subscription to each and every one of her relatives. But, alas, sensational news proved scarce and one-finger typing laborious, so Elizabeth retired from journalism. Next, she tried a few short stories—deathless prose about children lost in a woods and wicked witches who cast spells over them. Elizabeth submitted these epics to a Boston newspaper, but they never saw the light of print.

Did she give up? No, indeed. In high school she proceeded to win an essay contest and the golden opportunity to recite her essay at graduation exercises—and what a painful prize that turned out to be! Later, during college years, she took writing courses at the University of Arizona and at Simmons, and also attended a Writers' Conference at Dartmouth. But it was at Harvard Summer School that Elizabeth wroté her "first story" —during a course in Short Story Writing given by Professor Paul Engle of the University of Iowa, co-editor (with Hansford Martin) of the current O. Henry Awards series.

May we quote another passage from the author's letters? "One's first check for a story," she wrote, "is almost too exciting—I could hardly bear, as a matter of fact, to cash it; but necessity is apparently the mother of practicality." Well put, Miss Anthony; but remember, too, that inner necessity is the mother of creativeness—so keep on writing!

THE SEVENTH MURDER OF HENRY'S FATHER

by ELIZABETH ANTHONY

THE ONLY PROBLEM IN HENRY L. Caston's life was his father. Already he had murdered the old man six times. And yet it was not finished. For his father was sly and unbelievably cunning. He hid in such different people—tall men, short men, children, and, of late, in a va-

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riety of women. It was becoming a nuisance and threatening to interfere with Henry's pattern of life. Right now, for example, his vacation was due in two days and he should be assembling his shirts, ties, and summer shoes, making notes about the work to be done on his return, explaining to his wife how to make an inventory in triplicate of the things to be taken to the inn. All these tasks and the pleasant duty of discussing his route with his coworkers lay ahead. And should be done immediately. Yet Henry Caston had to spend all his time, his strength, and his love on murdering his father. It hardly seemed fair.

The first murder had been exciting, and it had given Henry a sense of liberation and a certain delight in his own careful planning. It had been done with precision, he had thought at the time. And yet, when he looked back on it, he was a little dissatisfied. Just a drunken man in the park late at night. Not a wise hiding place for his father when you came right down to it. The old man never had been able to hold his liquor.

The second murder had been a little hurried. Henry had been surprised seven months after the first murder to find that his father had managed to pull himself together again. He had thought his work finished until he had walked through the park and had seen the tired young man on the bench. And Henry had known by the way the young man shook his head back and forth, back and forth, that his father had found a new hiding place. And what a clever one, for his father had never been tired. Henry had killed his father rather quickly the second time; he hadn't even enjoyed it. Afterward, when he left the park, he breathed deeply and tried to feel the sense of liberation again.

But, somehow, he couldn't feel quite at ease; because it was apparent now that the old man had so much vitality that Henry was almost sure there would be another resurrection.

In his lifetime, his father had always been very strong, a great booming man who hated weakness. He had enjoyed making fun of Henry, mimicking what he called "Henry's fussy ways." Henry hadn't expected him ever to die, but one day he collapsed with a heart attack in his study. Henry had been surprised by the great number of people, saddened people, at the funeral. Of course, he realized that they were sad only because death seemed more true all of a sudden; but even so, it was odd. Henry himself had breathed a sigh of relief when the coffin was closed tightly and put in the ground. So much for the old man, he thought as he took his wife's arm and left the cemetery. He walked slowly with his head down in a proper posture of woe. One in the eye for the old man, he mused, and about time too.

Life had gone serenely for a while.

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Henry dutifully put flowers on his father's grave and soberly put them on his mother's. She had died at Henry's birth which had taken place two months earlier than expected. She had been delicate, his father had said, a little finicky like Henry, but a good woman. Henry had always missed not having a mother.

It was seven months after his father's funeral, on one of Henry's expeditions to the cemetery, that he had first felt a slight uneasiness. The ground had seemed softer, or dustier. He was not quite sure at first what the difference was, but something had been disturbed. Then he had a sudden bright awareness that his father had not stayed in the grave. Henry stood up; he might have known, he thought, he might have known. And that day he began his search for his father . . .

When he came to the third and fourth murders, it was easy. He decided he was getting the hang of it, than laughed at the word he had chosen. For certainly he would never be caught. No one else seemed to know that his father was so clever. True, there had been a certain amount of excitement in the newspapers, but no one had connected the murders at all. Perhaps because he had used a different weapon in each case.

Only once had he played with the idea that a perfect murder involved retribution, and that crime without punishment was so incomplete that his father had refused to stay dead. So, for the fifth murder, he had brought a gun into the publishing office where he worked and showed it to the two girls who worked with him. He had informed them that he was going on a dangerous mission to Revere and that he needed protection because he was lame. He saw them smile at each other and wondered whether he had overplayed his hand. Why should they smile? He put the gun in his pocket and had the satisfaction, as the day wore on, of seeing Sally, who sat beside him, wince when he reached into his pocket for his tobacco pouch. And when he came back from lunch, he heard her tell Jean that she knew Henry was only being silly, but somehow wasn't it nerve-wracking. Of course, she added, it wasn't really loaded, but even so, wasn't it queer?

True to his word, Henry went to Revere that night, and when the morning papers carried the story of the discovery of the body of a middle-aged woman outside Revere, he sat in his office and waited for justice. The girls were busy and, after perfunctory good mornings, didn't pay much attention to him as they worked. Sally had asked him a little nervously if he still had his gun, and when he said no, she looked at him soberly and stated that the whole thing had made her uneasy. "You never know about guns. All sorts of accidents. When they're loaded, I mean," she had added.

"I think I know about guns," Hen-

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ry scowled. "I've had a permit for this for over ten years. The chief of police himself gave it to me. Have to protect myself, you know."

Sally looked down at her desk. When she spoke, her voice was light and strained. "I wasn't going to say anything, but if you bring it in again, I'll have to tell Mr. Jones. There must be some sort of rule against these things."

Henry laughed. Mr. Jones, indeed! As if Mr. Jones weren't a good Mason like himself. He'd give her short shrift.

And, so, all day he waited for justice—to be sure the old man was dead; and all day it never came. The girls had finally noticed the newspaper story about his latest murder, and he had walked in on them talking about it as he returned from his afternoon coffee break.

"You said something about me?" he asked as he limped over to his chair and adjusted the cushion. He lowered himself into the chair, eased his lame leg on a footstool, and looked at them inquiringly.

Sally laughed. "We were just reading about your victim," she said.

"Victim?" Henry asked.

"You know," said Jean, "the dangerous mission to Revere last night."

"Oh, that," said Henry. "That turned out all right."

"All the same," Sally declared, "I don't think you should bring a gun into the office. There's something unnatural about it."

Henry smiled paternally. He was, after all, a good deal older than these girls. And he would have to be careful not to frighten them. He assured Sally that he would never bring the gun into the office again and, opening his folder, set to work on the latest manuscript.

But as he worked he ached for justice, and as he felt this pain he found deep within him a resistance. He wouldn't have to have justice, he decided; he was stronger than that. All he had to do was stick to the routine and he would win out.

And so his sixth murder of his father was unhurried, methodical. When he saw the old man hiding again, he simply executed him and went on his way. The old man had chosen an adolescent this time, a pock-marked scrawny youth with little that was pleasing about him. Henry felt distaste for him even as he killed him. It did seem that his father could have been more discriminating.

But this seventh time it was quite different. Henry felt troubled and harassed. Why couldn't his father have stayed dead till after Henry's vacation? After all, the last murder had been a bare seven months before, and it all took so much effort. As always, he had known of the resurrection when he awoke in the morning. It completely ruined his breakfast. To be sure, he went through the usual pattern of orange juice, two four-minute eggs, one piece of toast with butter, one piece of toast with

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jam, and two cups of coffee. But he had violent indigestion when he finished.

"I'm ill," he said gloomily, looking at his wife.

She smiled sympathetically. "Perhaps you should stay home today. Or drop in and get some of that stomach medicine from Dr. Dale."

"Dr. Dale," he snorted. "I wouldn't go to that quack. Imagine him insisting that you have your foot operated on *before* my vacation. Any fool would know that it could wait till September."

Mrs. Caston stood up and put the dishes on a tray. She was completely dressed for the day except that she wore soft slippers instead of her customary shoes. Henry looked at her feet and his lips tightened; but he decided not to talk about them. If there was anything he didn't need just now, it was an argument.

He pushed back his chair, put the newspaper under his arm, and started to leave. "I may be a little late tonight," he said. "Last minute things to catch up on. Perhaps you can start the packing and . . ."

"And make a list in triplicate. I know," she answered. "I'll do that this afternoon when it's a little cooler."

"Be sure to put one copy in the file."

"I will."

"And another in the top drawer of the desk."

"And the third one we'll take with us. Really, Henry, it's been twenty years," said Mrs. Caston almost petulantly. She was still a pretty woman who prided herself on her even temper and her happy disposition.

"Well, you might be more cheerful about it," Henry grumbled. "After all, it's a vacation and a vacation is supposed to be fun. By the way, I think I'll just take my bag into the office and bring my things home."

"I thought that was tomorrow," said Mrs. Caston, a little puzzled.

"Can't a man change his routine occasionally without upsetting the whole house?" Henry asked indignantly. "I happen to think it's important to do it today," he added, and going over to the closet he took out his black Gladstone. He started for the door, then looked back at his wife apologetically. "I guess I'm a little out of sorts today," he said. "I'm sorry."

She came over and kissed him quickly. "You're not feeling well, that's all. I don't mind what you say. But do stop at the drugstore and get some medicine."

Henry nodded, patted her on the shoulder, and left, carrying the black Gladstone bag.

When he reached the office, Henry put the bag beside his desk, sat down, and filled and lit his pipe. He smoked thoughtfully for a minute, then looked at Jean. "Where's Sally?" he asked.

"She went down to the stock room. For a special size folder, I think," Jean anwered.

"I wish I'd known," said Henry.

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"I need some more red pencils and a new ribbon for my typewriter."

"Call up and order them."

"Oh," Henry said, "there's no hurry. I guess it can wait till after my vacation. We start in two days, you know."

"Um," said Jean.

"Up route 128 and then over to route 24. I usually start at four," he said, leaning back in his chair, "and then at seven we stop and eat crabmeat sandwiches. My wife always puts them up in the morning. At seven we're just halfway and those sandwiches certainly taste good."

"I should think so," said Jean.

"No, I don't get tired of things I really like. Take those two mountains in back of the inn. I've been looking at them for twenty years, but I never get tired. Of course, I'm lame. Never could climb those mountains the way I'd like to. Did I ever tell you who my favorite hero is?"

"Hannibal, I think," Jean said.

She looked amused, Henry noticed. Her generation had no sense of heroes. He stood up and put the Gladstone on his desk. "Guess I'll pack up my goods and chattels," he said, rubbing his hands together.

Jean looked up at him. "Aren't you a day early with that routine?"

"You sound like my wife," Henry said. "My routine, as you call it, is only a matter of efficiency. And today it's important that I do this." He took his pen out of its stand, wrapped it in a piece of tissue, and deposited it in the bag. The pen stand followed. He detached the electric clock and put that in next. His pencil stand, his two everlasting pencils each with four colors of lead, his engagement pad, and his paperweight, an Indian head that had once adorned the hub of a favorite car, followed. This deeply satisfying routine was suddenly broken by a light sound from the corridor.

"One, two," someone whispered, "plop. One, two, plop-plop."

Something died in Henry. He turned, his shoulders hunched, and stared toward the door. And then he slowly relaxed. It was only Sally, standing there holding her pocketbook in one hand and pretending to drop things in it with her other hand. She stood there transfixed, her face reddening.

"I was trying to be funny," she said vaguely. "I wasn't exactly imitating you. I don't know what I was doing really. I'm very sorry. It . . ."

"Don't worry," said Henry magnanimously. "I think it's quite funny myself. It was just that you startled me. The repetition. The one, two, plop; one, two, plop-plop. I couldn't understand it."

"You looked at me strangely, you know," Sally said, coming into the room and putting her bag on her desk. "I don't know what kind of a look it was."

"It was just that you startled me," Henry said.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know why I did it either. I'd

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better start working. It looks as if I'm the one who needs a vacation."

Brat, thought Henry. Silly, inefficient brat. He added his calendar, two folders of notes, an old sweater, an extra pair of shoes, his special ruler, and a carefully annotated list of the work he had done in the past year, then closed and locked his Gladstone, and put it back beside the desk. Then he started making a list of things his associates might need to know about his work during his absence. After this was completed, he dictated some letters and a list of work in progress, and made a duplicate list of dates when galleys had been corrected and page proofs checked.

The day passed pleasantly. So pleasantly, in fact, that Henry could hardly believe in the resurrection of his father. When five o'clock came, he still had no plan. He said good night to the girls and, taking the Gladstone bag, he started walking to the station.

It was quite hot, a sultry August day, and the bag seemed heavy. Henry was tired and he didn't really feel up to murder. He wanted to go home and have his customary three ryes and ginger ales. He sighed. And suddenly he decided he would go home. He didn't really care if his father was still alive. At least for one day he could stay that way. Irregular, yes, but it really was too hot.

He caught the next train home and went into the house. The rooms were cool and quiet and orderly. Bowls of bright flowers echoed the living-room chintz. Henry looked around with pleasure. It was nice to come home. Peggy must be upstairs, he thought, and he went to the foot of the stairs. "I caught an early train, dear," he called. "Too hot."

"I'm up here," she answered, "just finishing the packing. Bring your bag up. I'll need that one too."

He went up the stairs slowly, breathing with a little effort.

When he went in the room and put the Gladstone down by the door, he saw his wife bending over one of her suitcases, putting in clothes from a slowly diminishing pile. Putting clothes into the case with a familiar rhythm—one, two, plop—one, two, plop-plop. How exceptionally shrewd of his father. Henry went toward him with his hands outstretched . . .

Later, Henry Caston exchanged his coat for a smoking jacket that a friend had given him one Christmas. He took his pipe and went downstairs to the library where he mixed a rye and ginger ale. Holding the glass tightly, he sat down in a green leather chair, and wept because his wife was dead.

And as he sat there in the library, he felt his skin begin to tighten. Something larger than he was stretching him, expanding him, pushing him out beyond his own size. He brushed his tears away and stood up, full of indignation. Now his vacation was really ruined. His father was in him.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FRANK SWINNERTON**

TITLE: ***Soho Night's Entertainment***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Calloway

LOCALE: London

COMMENTS: *The famous British novelist goes sleuthing in Soho . . . Meet Inspector Calloway, the stolid manhunter, and Rouben, the purveyor of forgetfulness, and the enchanting "princess" — in a New Arabian Nights' melodrama.*

ROUBEN'S, I FOUND, WAS A DARK little restaurant. Its rich red walls were obscured by dingy paintings, and only one small crimson-shaded lamp lighted each of the tables. At first glance it seemed the ideal trysting place for secret lovers rather than for such steely-hearted fellows as Calloway and myself. Yet for some reason Calloway had asked me to meet him here.

After passing through the doorway I would have been as blind as a man entering a cave from sunshine if Calloway, standing just within the door, had not touched my arm.

"Hullo," said I. "Are you a ghost?"

"Your dead conscience," replied Calloway. "I've got a table." He guided me through the gloom.

An old bent waiter hovered near us, a despairing character who must have been sick of the smell of food and hated the very thought of customers. I pictured him as feeling sure they would demand impossible dishes and ignore all his aged recommendations. Nevertheless, carrying a soiled and battered wine list, he plodded after us toward the back of the restaurant, where everything but the tables seemed even gloomier.

"You drink cocktail?" the antique waiter disgustedly supposed.

"Two Pernods, please." Calloway's tone, polite but authoritative, sent the old chap hastening off, flat-footed, at dangerous speed. Dim-witted though he might be, the waiter knew a man of character by his voice.

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Calloway must have been in the place before, as he knew its ways; but the waiter had given no sign of recognition. That is because Calloway's face is just like the face of every third man one does not notice in the street. Since Calloway is an extremely quick-witted Detective-Inspector, this unremarked face has immense advantages. Many a criminal has cursed "the invisible man" who brought him to justice.

I did not ask why we were at Rouben's. Nor, if I had done so, would Calloway have told me. He is secretive — it is a mark of his calling. All the same, he has a nose for good food, and when off duty he likes to take his ease in Soho; and it might be that we were merely dining well to celebrate a little triumph of his. But is Calloway *ever* off duty? I have often wondered.

"A discreet place," I remarked under my breath. "A place for great Civil Servants to bring their mistresses."

"You must use it again," answered Calloway, carelessly passing the menu. He smiled.

The menu looked good; but I played safe by choosing smoked trout and a tournedos, which I like. I then hoped to drink a cosy Pichon-Longueville with the tournedos. Calloway, knowing my relish for this grand wine, favored me by suggesting it.

"They have some twenty-six," he observed, "in excellent condition."

"Nothing could be better. But do you come here so often," I asked, "that you know the cellar? If I used the place, should I embarrass you?"

"I can rely on your —" Calloway changed the tenor of his speech, while continuing to use the same smiling tone. I became aware of somebody standing beside us — somebody in black with small white cuffs and a delicately-flowered white apron. She had come to the table soundlessly, and I looked up into the young, serious, very dark face of one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen.

She listened gravely while Calloway ordered our food; and then, with a regal inclination of the head, went quickly away. I breathed deep. The effect she had upon me was astonishing; it was an effect, not of attraction or repulsion, but of awe.

A moment elapsed before I recovered enough to say, "Rouben employs waitresses, I observe. Or are they, as they seem, princesses?"

"One," replied Calloway. "Waitress, not a princess."

"A beauty. Is she Rouben's daughter?"

"No," said Calloway.

That was all. It made me eager to see the princess again — and, in fact, to observe the effect she had on Calloway. He obviously knew Rouben's cellar. Did he rate Rouben's beautiful waitress above the cellar? I did not dare to ask.

Rouben himself — or so I judged — now came from somewhere near the front door straight towards us. He was slightly above middle height, broad, swarthy, black-haired and

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black-eyed, very genial and very smiling, and he had small white plump hands like those of Queen Victoria in her late photographs. The tips of his fingers, which rested upon our table under the light, were excessively delicate. I saw from the slight movement of Calloway's eyes that they had attracted his attention.

"You order, gentlemen?" he said in a smooth voice. "You happy, that's so?"

What a smile! Rouben's lids dropped; his full lips spread; within his geniality I read insatiable appetite. Was the beautiful waitress thus explained? I looked at Calloway, admiring his mask, which was that of as typically beefy an Englishman as ever appeared in Continental fiction.

"All are happy at Rouben's," said Calloway, with the air of a dull man being gallant. "Rouben makes them so."

It seemed acceptable.

"I like much to think that. Oh, I like to think that!" murmured Rouben, devoutly. He looked toward the ceiling; and one's heart hardened at the sight of the coarse lips and fleshy under-chin. This was a cruel man. "It is my prayer! You know, gentlemen —" He lowered his head confidentially. Piety was succeeded by gentle unction like the flow of thick oil from a tap. "So much unhappiness in the world; so many lonely, disappointed, frustrated . . . If I can, you understand . . ." He made the *maître d'hôtel's* small gesture in which thumb and forefinger touched. "If I can bring a little cheer . . . forgetfulness . . ."

He struggled for still better words.

Calloway nodded. "Oblivion, yes. You're a benefactor, Mr. Rouben."

The man laughed. The chuckle shook his body. How genial! And at the same time how *not* genial! He ought to have offered us each a small white packet of oblivion.

Instead of doing this, he gave a smiling little bow, looked closely at Calloway from under his heavy lids, and turned to another table by the opposite wall. There he greeted newly-arrived guests, bowing low to the woman, shaking hands lingeringly with the man as if they were intimate friends.

At that moment the princess returned. She placed our dishes before us with lovely hands, and when she withdrew it was as if the restaurant had grown dark; yet I had hardly looked at her face. I had been so much engrossed in her exquisite hands that I had forgotten, after all, to peep at Calloway.

Two minutes later, a woman, dark as Rouben himself, came quickly into the restaurant. She wore a crimson cloak, was tall, and although still smart in appearance, she had lost the first confident freshness of youth. I supposed her just on the wrong side of thirty-five, and troubled because there were so many attractive girls in the world.

She smiled, nevertheless, at the princess, without jealousy, nodded to the bent old waiter, and went past

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us to a table across the restaurant. Calloway, facing that way, showed interest both in the woman and in her position. Rouben turned his shoulder to her as she passed. A hush fell upon the place.

Presently Rouben went away.

"Is it narcotics?" I murmured to Calloway; but Calloway made no reply. I should have to be more discreet! We settled to our meal.

We had been eating for five minutes, and were ready for the second course, when I saw Rouben returning. He came very slowly and carefully, bearing in steady hands two glasses full of some *aperitif* which he seemed to regard as the elixir of life. His lips were pressed together, his face was set. All geniality had left it during that journey. Then he was past us, and I saw the princess close upon his heels.

She, too, was tragically intent, although she carried nothing more precious than a tray of *hors d'oeuvres*. She moved behind me, to the table in the corner. I lost sight of her. The ancient waiter, still grimacing with disgust, but showing increased pace which I attributed to Rouben's intimidating presence, toddled over to serve the people across the room, carrying glasses and a big bottle poised on a colossal white-metal salver. His eyes were fixed on either Rouben or the princess.

"By Jove!" thought I. "If he doesn't look where he's going —"

I was right. The salver tipped, slid. The whole thing must have fallen like an avalanche upon Rouben's back, for the crash was terrific. It was followed by rattling, tinkling cascades like thunder and lightning. You never heard such a row.

I turned in dismay, in time to see Rouben leaping to his feet like a man at whom a bomb has been thrown. He was a dirty gray, terrified, screaming in frenzy at the culprit, who was bent double. Not being a linguist, I could understand only parts of his abuse; but the words I heard were the foulest in the world.

Beyond Rouben was the princess, her pearly face in the shadow, her body rigid as a statue of black marble. Her back was to the wall, as if she were supporting herself by its aid. The other woman sat smiling. A gleam of light from the red-shaded lamp shone only upon her chin and bosom, but I thought her eyes glittered in the semi-darkness.

All was over in a moment. The old waiter first cringed, his lips moving in obsequious apology, then backed unsteadily away to fetch a dustpan and swab. The princess might have been his shadow. She passed and disappeared. Rouben recovered himself, sat down again, said something polite to his table companion, raised his glass of the *aperitif*, and with an air of radiant good humor motioned to her to do the same.

Apparently he forgave and forgot. He watched the lady drain her glass, and then he quaffed his own with an air almost of bravado. I saw him nod three or four times, watching the

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woman as if to be sure the drink had been to her taste.

Then we heard the tinkle of glass as the wretched ancient, upon his knees, with dingy tails draggling over his boots, swept up the debris. He was an abject sight, arousing pity and contempt. We averted our gaze, and I felt my neck aching from its prolonged twist during the post-crash scene. The princess stood at our table, serving the tournedos as if nothing whatever had happened.

Nothing whatever? Her hands, her arms, her whole body trembled violently. Her mouth was closed as if she were forcibly keeping her teeth from chattering. I saw Calloway look deliberately up into her face. I saw that she refused to meet his glance. I saw that as she turned away she shuddered.

Consumed with curiosity, I wondered what was really going on behind the scenes at Rouben's.

To my surprise, as soon as we had left the place and crossed the street, a man coming from the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue spoke to Calloway. I had not seen the man until that instant, and he may either have stepped from a doorway or turned the corner of a side street; but I did not doubt that he had been waiting, for Calloway said to me with unusual abruptness:

"Sorry, old chap. I'm wanted. I'll ring you tomorrow."

So I had no chance to tease him about the princess, or give my opinions of Rouben and the dark woman of the *aperitif*, or ask further about drugs, or demand a translation of Rouben's address to the dodderer. I was forced to go back to my flat, speculating over a pipe on all that I had seen, thought, and guessed. It was quite a lot for one evening.

More was to follow. I didn't hear from Calloway, but at the Club the following afternoon I picked up an early edition of *The Planet*. There, in big capitals, were the words:

FAMOUS RESTAURATEUR FOUND DEAD

The restaurateur was Rouben.

Rouben! That was a shock. When I had absorbed it I found my head buzzing with surmises. How had he died? Sixteen hours ago I had endured his unction, heard his fury, seen his soft hands and his ceremonial toast to the strange woman in crimson. Now all that power for evil — as I had believed — was gone. How? Why? I was only restrained from telephoning Calloway by knowledge that if anything was "on" he would be in it up to his neck.

He *was* in it up to his neck.

A later edition of the paper bellowed:

POISON IN SOHO

Rouben, the famous restaurateur, died early this morning from a dose of as yet unidentified poison. Was it suicide? There is good reason to believe that it was murder. Rouben's staff have

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been closely questioned. All visitors to the restaurant are being traced. Curious crowds have gathered outside the restaurant all morning. Detectives maintain great reticence.

The last words did not surprise me. Detectives always maintain reticence — until they have something to say. The press was forced back upon its own resources; and *The Planet* and other evening papers did some hasty research into Rouben's past life.

Their discoveries did not amount to much.

WAS ROUBEN A DRUG-TRAFFICKER? STRANGE STORY OF LONDON UNDERWORLD.

ROUBEN'S ADVENTURES IN SOUTH AMERICA.

MILLIONAIRE IN THE KITCHEN. MAN OF MANY ENEMIES.

These were some of the headlines. One saw wild, knowing references to Bucharest, Hong Kong, Lima, and Chinatown, those godsent gifts for the writer-up of untaped corpses. Then, having decided upon murder, the press was bent upon romanticizing that lecherous creature, the man who wanted to make people happy through forgetfulness — or oblivion, as Calloway had called it.

Had Rouben taken fright at Calloway's word? The restaurateur was probably a blackmailer, and subject to blackmail. He bullied. He raged. But he was a coward, too. Remembrance of the crash, and the gloomy old waiter — bent, shuffling, crouching abjectly over his dustpan — flew into my mind. He was only one of the people who must have hated Rouben. Murder or suicide: which was it?

I felt considerable relief at the sound of Calloway's voice on the telephone.

"Care to come round?" he asked. "I've got most of it sorted out."

In the small crowd outside Rouben's were the cameramen, of course, hungry for something to waste their films on — one or two nondescripts who might have been racing touts — a few genuine sightseers. I recognized two or three familiar policemen; one, named Coxon, was in uniform at the door — he saluted and passed me within.

There sat Calloway at a table in the restaurant. But since last night something had happened to the restaurant. No carpet lay on the bare floor: probably the floor had been sounded and raised in a search for whatever was thought to be stored under it. The tables no longer bore tablecloths and discreet little red-shaded lamps. They were drawn close to one side, piled top to top, half of them with their legs in the air; and from the previously dim ceiling hung a biggish electric light which floodlit the place and drove away all shadows.

"Oh, come in, Frank," Calloway said in his usual quiet tone. "Sorry not to have called you earlier."

"I guessed you were busy."

"Frightfully busy. The news only

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reached us at 10 o'clock yesterday morning; and there's been the devil's own confusion."

He began to load his pipe, looking like the sort of businessman one sees in a teashop playing dominoes.

"But you're through with that?" I asked.

"Pretty well."

"The papers have been full of his lurid history."

Calloway grimaced. He is not partial to newspaper stories. I think he'd write psychological novels if he were not a policeman with a full-time job.

"They've got to fake up something," he said.

"I guessed narcotics, last night," I modestly claimed. "That's the only solid item in the papers. I suppose it was simple as ABC to you."

"Yes. I've wanted an excuse to ransack this place."

"So you killed him?"

"Somebody did."

"The old waiter?" I asked. "After that wigging?"

Calloway smiled.

"Poor old Jacques! He's not the type. Did you see him when he dropped the tray?"

"I guessed it was going to happen. The actual event was behind me. Don't forget you were facing that way. I suppose you saw everything?"

Calloway's face darkened. Perhaps it was the horrible light that sharpened his cheekbones.

"Several things," he said reluctantly, as if he had not relished what he saw.

"Was the princess in the way? A minute before the crash I heard you say, 'Damn that girl!' "

"Did I?" Calloway looked as nearly startled as I have ever seen him. He then became silent. I didn't interrupt his reverie. It was because I had tact that he liked to have me with him.

At last he said, "I didn't know I'd said anything. I'm glad — rather, sorry — you reminded me. As to Jacques, he's the one who found Rouben. Went down into the wine cellar this morning, and there was our friend, looking nasty. The lights were on. It wasn't only a wine cellar, of course. He'd got the other stuff — the drugs — hidden in casks, even in cobwebbed bottles. All very obvious. He wasn't a clever man, not really."

"I thought he looked more sensual than clever."

"Yes, it was women. Plenty of them."

"You'd say he was attractive to them?"

"Who knows what attracts them?" he demanded. It sounded as if the fellow had lately suffered a blow.

I thought I'd move him away from that, so I said, "What's the princess doing here?"

He took me up very sharply, exclaiming, "Don't be a damned fool!"

"I only wondered why she was here." Calloway was evidently rattled, for he walked about restlessly. I called after him, "Do you know anything about the woman who dined with him? Just one of them? Past or present?"

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The restless pacing stopped. He was normal again.

"Passing, I gather. I've had a lot of talk with Jacques. She came into it."

"If passing, perhaps superseded. Could she have done it?"

Calloway smiled as if he thought me an old stupid. He said, "They all call her Hortense. She's been about as long as they remember — latterly not so often. They didn't expect her last night."

"There you are! She stayed behind and put something in his coffee. How's that?"

"Rotten. She's coming in a few minutes. You'll see her."

I tried something new.

"What was he doing in the cellar? Had he been taken there?"

"No," said Calloway, drily. "He went there by himself."

"For dope?"

"He didn't take the stuff himself. No, he kept everything there. Some rare wines. Cupboard full of cigars. Also, he was a bit of a chemist. We've found a lot of interesting things, including letters and a book of addresses. All useful. I expect there'll be a general skedaddle, which won't come off. The narcotics boys are checking everything. No, from our point of view he's better dead; but of course I've got to find out what happened."

"I thought you knew?"

"I hope to God I don't."

I sat digesting this information . . .

I was still sitting there with my arms folded and my head down, when I was startled by a whispering or rustling noise. It came from the far end of the restaurant, beyond what I thought of as Rouben's table; and it was caused by the old waiter's shuffling footsteps on the bare boards. Quite uncanny. The old chap looked odd in a short blue and white cotton jacket; but in addition to this he was a strange sight, his cheeks like a badly-laundered bath towel, and his chin covered as if with mold by a revolting white stubble. He did not raise his eyes, but plodded on towards us. Behind him was a woman whom I recognized as Rouben's guest two nights ago.

Jacques squeezed his way to the kitchen. Calloway went forward.

"Good afternoon, Madame Kimel. Won't you sit down?"

His tone was not unkind; but she stared at him as a doe might stare at a butcher. Sitting at an angle to her, I could see the rise and fall of her breast and the throbbing of her throat. Calloway, as if to ease her fears, sat down again at his table. He glanced at a page of notes.

"You know why I've asked you to come, don't you? I'm questioning everybody who may be able to help me. Now, you dined here two nights ago with Mr. Rouben. Would you mind telling me what time you left him?"

She was in terror. That was clear. All the same, she held herself haughtily erect, as Marie Antoinette did on her way to the guillotine.

"I don't know. I can't think. It's all so horrifying."

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"I quite understand. Take your time and try to remember."

"I think 10 . . . 11 o'clock. I don't know."

"Had everybody else gone?"

She was a beautiful woman, but because she was no longer young the great light was merciless to her. She was revealed as haggard, with dry lips, and cheeks which had begun to grow hollow. Her fingers were tightly intertwined, and she often touched her lips with a pale tongue. At times she looked beseechingly at Calloway, as if entreating him to spare her. You could follow the struggle she was having to remember — or to invent.

"I think . . . you mean the others who dined here?"

"My friend and I were among them."

"Oh?" She was quite vague. "I don't remember you."

"All gone, the place empty — is that so? Not the staff — Jacques, Emilie the cashier?" Only after a pause did he add, as if he had just thought of her, "Adrienne?"

That name produced its reaction. The lady became even more secretive.

"I think . . . I am sure . . . yes, all were gone."

"Jacques?"

"Oh, I forgot. He's always here."

"You didn't notice him. You saw nobody but Rouben? What happened? Did you quarrel?"

Hortense's movement exceeded a start; it was almost a leap. She saw the danger in that question and breathed even more quickly. But danger loosened her tongue. It made her almost voluble.

"Yes, yes. We quarreled. He was vindictive. He tortured me — saying I was old, displeasing, that I should not live long —" Her hands were now free of each other. They were clenched. She struck the air with them. "It was hideous!"

"You said you wished he was dead?"

"No! I don't remember. I was in pain."

"Did you, in fact, wish he was dead?"

The lady shuddered.

"Perhaps. Perhaps. In anger. I don't think so. It would have satisfied him too much. Yes, I did wish him dead! But I did not kill him. I don't know who killed him. I don't know. I have no idea. It might be — anybody." Her voice suggested the approach of hysteria.

"Madame Kimel, I ask these questions as a duty. I know you had a bitter quarrel and that it was not the first. It was one of many. Isn't that so? Over a long period of time?"

"A long time, yes."

"You hadn't seen him for several weeks. Why did you come here two nights ago?"

"He telephoned to me. He asked me to come."

"To dine?"

"Yes."

"Why to dine? As a friend?" She was consumed by memory of wrong and hatred. Calloway had to speak more loudly in order to obtain an an-

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swer. "Nothing more? I said, nothing more?"

I expected her to scream a denial. She did not do so. Indeed, when she spoke it was almost as if she sighed.

"Not only to dine, Mr. Calloway."

"I see. You were to spend the night with him. You did not spend the night? Or did you? You were his mistress?"

"I was not his mistress."

"Please!"

"Do not offend me by such a disgraceful suggestion!"

"I don't understand you, Madame Kimel."

"I was his wife, Mr. Calloway. I had been his wife for fifteen years."

Calloway showed no surprise. He merely wrote a word upon one of his sheets of paper, considered his further questions for a moment or two, and then embarked upon a series of them.

Having been married to Rouben for so long, she must know something of his affairs? *Nothing, nothing at all.* Hadn't she guessed anything? *Nothing!* Not about drugs? *Nothing! How could she?* Was she sure? *No drugs; nothing!*

She was not to be shaken.

Calloway retreated, and chose another topic.

Did she know anything about other women?

Ah, that was different! Her eyes glittered as I had seen them glitter before. Animation came into her haggard face. Rouben had been unfaithful to her throughout their married life. Again and again and again. Evidently he was incorrigible. She had left him twenty times — and returned as often. He had begged her to do so — entreated — until a little while ago.

That was different, was it? *It was different. He had told her something.* It had made her jealous? *She was past jealousy. It had nothing to do with his death. Nothing.*

Six months ago he had fallen in love — with a beautiful girl. His love was driving him mad, he said. He had asked her to divorce him, so that he could marry this girl. She had refused. She had refused — to save a lovely child from the hell she had known. Refused, refused! She had sworn she would always refuse.

She had seen him since then; she had dined with him. On friendly terms — not quarreling — without love or kindness, but on account of their daughter, who was at school, and whose future was in question.

But last night was different? *It was different. He had telephoned. It was the anniversary of their wedding day. To celebrate and forgive, he said. But she knew the lovely girl had died three months ago.*

"You forgave him? Yet you quarreled."

Her face grew as dark as a thundery sky. Only under pressure did she reveal that Rouben still wanted a divorce.

"Though the girl was dead?"

"Yes."

"Could there have been another beautiful girl?"

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No answer.

"Do you know the girl's name?"

It was clear to me, as it must have been clear to Calloway, that Hortense knew the girl's name. She pretended not to. She pretended never to have heard it. She sobbed. No, she could not remember the name.

At last she thought it had been Josephine.

"Josephine what?"

She did not know. No, she really did not know.

"Josephine what?" Calloway kept repeating.

It took fully ten minutes to extract the name — Josephine Arnould.

I could have sworn that the name meant something to Calloway. He sank back in his chair and his eyes closed as if he were exhausted.

That was all. Long after she had gone, he stood deeply considering the interview, sometimes walking up and down the empty restaurant, sometimes staring at the floor until one thought a pit yawned at his feet.

At last he stopped dead. He was a yard away.

"Blast this trade!" he said. It was almost a moan.

The blazing light overhead showed sweat on his brow.

He had pulled himself together again by the time the princess — or Adrienne, as I now knew she was called — joined us; and he placed the chair for her directly opposite to him with no change of manner that I could detect. As soon as he began his examination, however, I saw that he was suffering from unusual strain; he could hardly frame the questions which duty compelled him to ask. How strange that the two women, Hortense and Adrienne, should produce in the same room, in the same situation, such different emotions in a man whom I thought to be without emotion!

This girl fascinated me. She was exquisitely virginal, distinguished, resolute, again inspiring in me, by her pride, a feeling of adoration rather than masculine interest — as if the very blood of Aphrodite ran in her veins. She was very beautiful. Could one imagine her in love? I could hardly do so; yet I was caught by Calloway's bewildering manner, in which severity was incomprehensibly mingled with the humblest, most indulgent, simplicity.

"I want you to tell me the truth, Adrienne," he said, like a judge addressing a little girl in the witness box. She bowed. "The exact truth. You understand? How old are you?"

"I am nineteen," was the reply. Adrienne sat upright in the chair, as she must have once been taught by a good nurse. She had incredible poise.

"How long have you worked in this restaurant?"

"For a month."

"Did you know Mr. Rouben before you came to work here?"

She calmly consulted her memory. It was not that she hesitated.

"No. But I had heard of him."

"Why *did* you come here?"

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She could be as unreadable as a mask; and yet she was not a mask, but a living, breathing, enchanting girl. Her lips met; her expression, which hitherto had been one of lovely candor, faded from her eyes. She was about to lie — I was sure of it.

"I thought it would be . . . interesting."

Calloway looked gravely at her.

"A sort of game?" he asked.

She said, no, not a game. She had to earn her own living.

"You don't give that impression."

"No?" No explanation, no discomposure — only a polite acceptance of the limits of Calloway's knowledge of her.

"You remember what happened here two nights ago?"

Adrienne drew herself together, as if she felt suddenly cold. In a very low voice, as if they were alone, she said,

"Yes, I remember. You dined here."

"I dined here. That wasn't what happened."

"It was the third time you had been here."

I caught my breath. Extraordinary! She — alone among all the human beings who were not his friends — had distinguished Calloway from other men!

"It was the third time," he said. "Do you know why I came?"

I was on tenterhooks. An instant's coquetry would destroy my belief in her — and probably Calloway's belief in her too. But it did not come. She said with the direct sincerity of a child:

"I think you wanted to find out something about Mr. Rouben."

"Was it something you know?"

A pause for thought.

"I think not."

She was not afraid of him. She did not tremble. She looked serious, but she was not in dread.

"You remember the lady in red, who also dined? Hortense? You know her?"

"I did not know her. I had seen her before."

"Did you know she was Mr. Rouben's wife?"

Ah! She took longer, this time, to answer; and when she did, it was with only one word. "Yes."

"Did Jacques tell you that? What else did Jacques tell you?"

There was no answer to this at all. Calloway repeated the question three times; still there was no answer. To my surprise he did not press her further. Instead, he said,

"Did you arrange with Jacques to drop the tray and startle everybody in the restaurant?"

"Not everybody. Not you." She was breathless.

Almost archly, Calloway said, "It did startle me, you know."

One glance; no more. Then a whisper of apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. It was so — terribly urgent."

"Why?"

"To frighten Mr. Rouben."

"So that — ?"

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No answer.

Again Calloway desisted. He would return to that question. Meanwhile, he asked, "What is your name?"

"Adrienne l'Ouvreuse."

"It isn't a real name, is it?"

"Oh, yes, quite real."

"Is it the name on your passport?"

The astonishing creature blushed.

"No." One hardly heard the admission.

"Why did you arrange with Jacques to frighten Mr. Rouben?"

She grew white again. Her face might have been ivory as she said, "I can't tell you why."

"Your real name is Arnould, isn't it? You had a sister Josephine?"

A slow red, quite unlike the former blush, crept into her cheeks. A first doubt of Calloway's good will must have been born in her. She did not otherwise reply to that question.

Calloway, with the only cruelty he had used to her, continued. "She was two years older than you. She fell in love. She came to England six months ago. She died three months ago. Are those things true?"

"Yes." It was a melancholy sigh. She shrank. You saw that love for her sister had been devotion.

"Was she Mr. Rouben's mistress?"

"No!" cried Adrienne, springing up, her voice as sharp as a whip. "It is not true! It is not true! Wicked!"

"You say that because she was your sister. Yet you came to this place. Did you think you could fill her shoes?"

She gave him a look of bitter scorn.

"Such a man? I tell you the truth. He shamed her. He was so infamous that she felt she had been made unclean. She took her own life!"

"Did she tell you that? Did she tell you that to avenge her? Did she tell you to kill his wife?"

"She wrote only, 'Forgive me. I cannot forgive myself.' I came here to find out the truth."

"Which did you plan to do?" insisted Calloway. "Your life may depend on the truth."

"I did not plan to do anything."

"Come! You can't expect me to believe that. You took a position as waitress here at Rouben's. You watched your opportunity. Last night, when they were together, you gave him poison. I saw you do it. Isn't that so? *Isn't that so?*"

Calloway, plying her with these charges, was now shouting. He was beside himself. I could not help it; I rose to my feet. He, quite aware of the movement and its significance, waved me aside as if to say, "This is not your business; it is something terribly personal between Adrienne and me."

She, for her part, leaned back hard in her chair. I thought she was fainting; but she did not faint. She returned Calloway's stare with an expression of horror.

That curious whispering noise came again. Jacques, who must have been listening, shuffled forward over the bare boards.

"If you would excuse me, sir," he muttered.

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"Go away, old man!" cried Calloway, in a fury.

"But I can tell you something, sir, which you ought to know before you say another word to Miss Adrienne —"

"Say nothing, Jacques," said Adrienne. "He is determined to hang me."

"Hang you?" echoed Calloway. His face worked.

"For God's sake, Calloway," I shouted, "listen to him!"

He looked at me as if he awakened from a dream.

"But I *saw*. I saw her change the glasses!"

"Sir!" entreated Jacques.

He told us everything in the next ten minutes.

He had been down in the wine cellar before dinner. Hidden unintentionally behind some racks, he had seen Rouben mixing what he thought was medicine, and had heard his employer say, "This one with the red stem for Hortense. The red stem. God help me, how I tremble!"

Jacques had been alarmed. He had watched Rouben put two glasses — one with a red stem, the other with a yellow stem — into a cupboard, and then go away. Afterward, with a flush of suspicion, Jacques had imagined the meaning of what he had seen and heard. Because he was grateful to Hortense for many kindnesses when Rouben and she were first married, he had grown so troubled that he did not know what to do.

"I am sure," he told Adrienne, "that my master intends some mischief to Madame Hortense. It is some medicine to make her ill. If we could only break the red-stemmed glass — or substitute another. But I know him. He is bad. He will watch. He will give us no chance. She will be made ill, deathly ill."

"By no means," Adrienne answered. "If you will drop your tray on his head, dear Jacques, I will take that instant of confusion to substitute another glass which you shall mix."

"It was done, sir," he told Calloway. "I mixed another glass — also with a red stem. You saw me drop my tray. But the dear child was so excited that she could only exchange the contents of the two glasses which were already on the table. The drink Mr. Rouben meant for Madame fell to his share. Miss Adrienne was, as you see, quite innocent."

I looked at Adrienne. She seemed unmoved; but I saw her glance swiftly at Calloway . . .

It occurs to me to remark that Hortense had had a lucky escape. Had Rouben, finding her adamant, and being determined to transfer his love from Josephine to her sister, taken an extreme course?

How innocent was Adrienne? What had she intended to do when she went to Rouben's?

I cannot tell you. All I know is that she has now been married to Calloway for three years, and that she shows no sign, as yet, of killing him — unless it is with the kindness of a devoted love.

Calloway and I have never again referred to the case.

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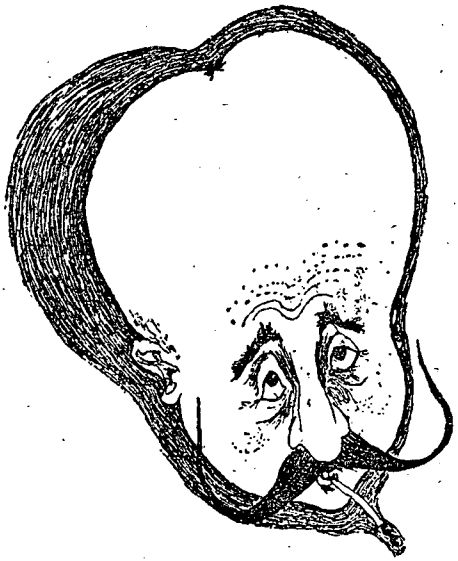

LA PARODIE JUSTE

For Christmas 1954 we were delighted to receive a handsome little book privately printed by Tage la Cour of Denmark. It contained a parody-pastiche titled THE MURDER OF SANTA CLAUS, *written by Mr. la Cour himself. Bound in stiff gray wrappers, beautifully printed and superbly illustrated, this short story is, in your Editors' opinion, the cleverest parody of Hercule Poirot we have ever read . . . To indicate the spirit in which this parody was written, and in which it was privately printed and distributed as a Christmas greeting, we can do no better than quote from the author's own colophon. Mr. la Cour wrote: "This little pastiche, originally published as a final mystification in the Danish anthology,* MORD TIL JUL (MURDER FOR CHRISTMAS), *1952, under the pseudonym of Donald McGuire, was written with the author's intention of paying sincere homage to the inimitable Agatha Christie and her sleuth, Hercule Poirot, who has for many years been considered prominent among our favourite detectives. And with sweet Christmas-time imminent, we—the illustrator, the translator, and the author—thought this little story a proper greeting to our British and American friends together with our very best wishes of a merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year" . . . The illustrator is Lars Bo, and one of the illustrations is shown above; the story was translated by Poul Ib Liebe, and for the record the original book was printed in Langkjærs Bogtrykkeri, with typography by Viggo Naae. We are grateful to all concerned for permitting us to reprint "The Murder of Santa Claus" as EQMM's Christmas story for 1956.*

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THE MURDER OF SANTA CLAUS

by TAGE LA COUR

ON CHRISTMAS DAY WE WERE making ourselves comfortable in M. Poire's luxurious apartment on Shaftesbury Avenue. The radio softly played *Holy Night, Silent Night,* and the scanty beams of a pale afternoon sun fell on the varied volumes of the bookshelves. The master detective was taking a little nap in his favorite armchair while—lounging on the hearth-rug—I was busy with the interesting occupation of cracking ginger-nuts.

M. Poire, having retired from active work, was even more occupied than ever before and nowadays he rarely found occasion to take a nap, let alone to sleep. This Christmas, however, the snow looked so white and idyllic that even criminals of a scale big enough to rouse the attention of M. Poire preferred to take it easy rather than risk their popularity by committing murders accompanied by the tunes of church and sleigh bells.

George, our inimitable valet, cautiously peeped in through the half-closed door—would he dare to disturb The Great Man? No, of course not; he chose to address my own humble self.

"I beg your pardon, Captain," he said, "but an express telegram for M. Poire has just arrived and I took the liberty to imagine that the matter might possibly be of some importance."

Having expressed my satisfaction on behalf of the young man's conduct, I turned to M. Poire and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

With a grunt the detective came round; he twirled at his magnificent mustache and fixed his super-intelligent eyes on me.

"Eh bien, mon ami," he said, "you have something to tell me?"

"Yes, this express telegram—the matter might be important!"

Pondering its contents, the dapper little Belgian held the blue envelope between his aristocratic fingers for a few minutes; then—as by a sudden, bright inspiration—he tore it open and read aloud:

AN ATROCIOUS MURDER COMMITTED TONIGHT AT DRUNKARD CASTLE. COME AT ONCE.

LADY GWENDOLYN DRUNKARD

"What does this message convey to you?" asked M. Poire.

"That your presence is wanted at Drunkard Castle in connection with a murder case."

"Eh bien."

Drunkard Castle was situated on a hilltop and its huge, moonlit silhou-

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ette stood out clearly against the snow and the navy-blue nocturnal sky—for it was night when we reached our destination. This was due partly to a breakdown of the car and partly to M. Poire's insisting on drinking chocolate in all the roadside inns we passed. According to my notes their number amounted to nineteen—from which two must be excluded, however, as the landlords of those inns refused to serve a drink of that kind.

Everyone—with the exception of the corpse—was assembled in the hall, anxiously looking forward to meeting the famous detective; the mistress of the castle received us with majestic grace and asked if we might possibly care to have a refreshment before starting to work.

"*Merci bien,* Milady, a small cup of chocolate perhaps," said M. Poire, courteously bestowing a kiss upon Lady Gwendolyn's hand, without getting his mustache entangled.

The detective, having consumed his *apéritif,* turned to address Lady Gwendolyn and asked:

"*Enfin,* who is murdered then—your spouse, I presume?"

"Exactly, dear M. Poire. He is lying in the library, of course, with a dagger of oriental origin in his back. At first we thought it was Santa Claus; then we discovered, however, that his Lordship had been trying to dress himself up as Santa Claus, intending no doubt—as was his habit—to distribute Christmas boxes among his domestics and tenants. The local police-inspector is waiting in the library and is naturally completely puzzled. His presence, I'm sure, will only serve to make *your* genius shine even more conspicuously."

Inspector Honeydew appeared to be a big, good-natured man with a circular face and a pair of hardly perceptible eyes—thus reminding you of a muffin showing off a couple of very modest currants.

"Well, M. Poire," he said, "I don't like the look of things in this case. The old chap is murdered beyond any doubt, but our only clue is this message written by the victim himself with his own blue blood right across this pink rug."

Inspector Honeydew handed a neatly folded rug over to M. Poire; and after having spread it on the floor, we read:

I take the liberty to inform you that I'm being murdered today by ---

For a moment Poire looked utterly surprised; he pressed one finger against the tip of his nose; then he lit a perfumed cigarette and inquired:

"Any fingerprints?"

"No," replied the inspector, "the villain seems to be a sly customer. He knows that sort of thing to be conclusive evidence, so—as far as I make it out—he must have been wearing gloves or rather, considering the season of the year, woollen mittens."

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"No suspects?" asked M. Poire.

"Well, all the domestics live in the most distant wing of the castle—about two miles from this spot—and they are all believed to have been in bed when the murder took place."

"How do you know when the murder took place?"

"Well, it must have happened some time after seventeen minutes past 11 P.M.—this being the exact hour and minute when Lord Drunkard summoned his youngest son, Ethelred, to tell him that he—his Lordship—had a bone to pick with him. Not being able to find the slightest trace either of crow or feathers, I gathered that his Lordship had expressed himself in terms of symbolism and actually had wished to give his son some kind of reproach. Accordingly I questioned Mr. Ethelred, who confessed to having lost £20,000 at draughts to a disreputable bookie and gambler, Mr. Tiptoe. This debt of honor is to be paid tomorrow before twelve o'clock noon, and the whole affair caused several embarrassing discussions between himself and the old Lord; but the latter—to quote Mr. Ethelred—had finally forked out the dough in hard cash after the plucking of the crow.

"The oldest son is in Australia breeding rabbits, which puts him in the clear. On the other hand, the daughter of the house—Lady Violet—is staying at the castle at present. She is engaged to an Italian count—Alfonso Conmoto—and Ethelred has let out that she, without success, tried to touch her father for £20,000 in order that she and the count, who is naturally impecunious, might set up for themselves and check famine for a couple of years.

"The traditional tramp, slinking about the premises, has been arrested. Seven of the domestics have proved to be ex-convicts with dossiers as long as the questionnaires from the Department of Statistics. The former rival of his lordship, Sir Arbuthnut Pineapple, is staying at the castle as Lady Gwendolyn's guest and—"

"Merci, M. Honeydew, I believe we've got enough facts already to go by. The rest is up to the little gray cells now. I'm quite sure, *mon capitain,* to be able to solve this problem in, let's say, about forty minutes—provided, of course, you bring me a pot of chocolate. Will you ask Lady Gwendolyn, Mr. Ethelred, Lady Violet, Sir Arbuthnut, the tramp, and the domestics to be present in the library at twelve o'clock midnight sharp?" M. Poire adjusted two solid-silver lions placed in front of the open fireplace. "Symmetry, *mon ami;* without symmetry and chocolate I cannot work."

When the period of 40 minutes was over we were met in the library by M. Poire, standing with his back turned to the marble fireplace in which a bright fire was burning; the chocolate pot was empty on Lady Gwendolyn's work-table.

"Eh bien, I have asked all of you to come here in order to reveal the

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secret of the guilty person in your presence. You see, by now I *know* the identity of that person. But first of all I want to review the facts of the case quite briefly:

"If we haven't a sadistic murder to deal with—and we never have in *my* cases—then a tangible motive must be found and he who has the strongest motive usually proves to be the murderer. And the murderer quite naturally always tries to destroy all such clues as might connect him with the case.

"You, Mr. Ethelred, had a first-class motive to kill Lord Drunkard; you have, however, never attempted to hide that motive—so I never really suspected you in earnest.

"As to Lady Violet, the matter is somewhat different. You wish, as I understand, to marry Count Conmoto and have accordingly asked your father for a dowry of £20,000. Your request, however, was refused. But in this wastepaper basket—" M. Poire triumphantly held up a waste-paper basket, adorned with pictures from *The Mother Goose Rhymes,* "in this I found a letter to you from your fiancé, which proves him to be identical with the mysterious Mr. Tiptoe—the man who won the £20,000 from your brother. Hence you already knew—before your father was murdered—your future to be secured."

M. Poire paused. "In your case, Sir Arbuthnut," he went on, "it is well known that you, as a young man, had courted Lady Gwendolyn's favors. Since I have had the honor to meet this enchanting Lady, I am nevertheless positively sure that you couldn't have harbored any resentment whatsoever to Lord Drunkard for his having been the one preferred.

"The domestics of the castle can likewise be excluded as suspects for according to my honored colleagues, Ellery Queen and John Dickson Carr, it isn't fair play to make domestics appear guilty in murder cases. It disappoints the reader.

"As for you now, Monsieur—" the master detective with a gracious bow turned to the tramp and addressed him—"may I ask you to take off your false nose, your wig, your false beard, and your sun glasses?"

A pin was heard to drop on the floor. Who else but the heir of Drunkard Castle—having returned from Australia—appeared in front of our wondering eyes!

"But Charles!" Lady Gwendolyn cried. "Will you go upstairs immediately and change your clothes! What *do* you mean by showing up here in such rags—and especially today, when your father has just been murdered!"

"Un moment, Milady!" With an impatient gesture M. Poire held up his hand. "Will you please let me carry on? Lord Drunkard will soon get ample time to change his clothes.

"According to all established rules, *you* Milord, ought to be the murderer; but no cases are quite that simple when M. Hercules Poire is investigating.

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"What conclusive evidence is missing in this case? You are silent? Why, the name of the murderer, of course! And who is the only person with an opportunity to substitute for that name those three foolish-looking dashes?

"*The machine compositor,* naturally! And why? Because the name was his own! . . . The motive? For a period of thirty years that poor man has been forced to peruse and compose fifty novels in which *I* make an appearance. And so he believed himself to be clever enough to fool Hercules Poire!"

The master detective bowed with mock modesty to the applauding audience.

No, never did I regret abandoning a promising career in His Majesty's Armed Forces to accompany my truly great friend, M. Poire, on his peculiar adventures and to witness his astonishing revelations—which are always based on a strictly logical foundation.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***A Matter of Seconds***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Ellery Queen

LOCALE: Wickiup, Colorado

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *How Ellery played a strictly unofficial role just before Kid Bolo was to step into the ring and meet the Champ in the first million-dollar prizefight west of Chicago . . .*

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A FIGHT expert to recall what happened in the ring that wild night the Champ fought Billy (the Kid) Bolo. Fans are still talking about how it put Wickiup, Colorado, on the map. But the odds are you've never heard how close that fight came to not being fought.

You remember how Wickiup got the match in the first place. The deputation from the Wickiup Chamber of Commerce, headed by millionaire cattleman Sam Pugh, trooped into the promoter's New York office, plunked down a seating plan of the new Wickiup Natural Amphitheater — capacity 75,000 — and a satchel containing a guarantee of $250,000 cash money, and flew back home with a contract for what turned out to be — figuring the TV, radio, and movie take — the first million-dollar gate west of Chicago in the history of boxing.

It promised to be a real whingding, too, well worth any sport's investment. Both fighters were rough, tough and indestructible, their orthodox style carrying no surprises except in the sudden-death department. Anything could happen from a one-round knockout to a hospital bed for two.

The Champ trained at the Wickiup Country Club and Billy the Kid at the big Pugh ranch, and days before the fight every hotel, motel, trailer

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camp, and tepee within three hundred miles was hanging out the *No Vacancy* sign. Wickiup became the Eldorado of every fight fan, sportswriter, gambler, and grifter between Key West and Puget Sound who could scare up a grubstake.

Ellery was in Wickiup to see the contest as the guest of old Sam Pugh, who owed him something for a reason that's another story.

The fight was scheduled for 8 P.M. Mountain Time, to make the 10 P.M. TV date for the Eastern fans. Ellery first heard that something was wrong exactly an hour and a half before ringtime.

He was hanging around the Comanche Bar of the Redman Hotel, waiting for his host to pick him up for the drive out to the Amphitheater, when he was paged by a bellboy.

"Mr. Queen? Mr. Pugh wants you to come up to Suite 101. Urgent."

The cattleman himself answered Ellery's knock. His purple-sage complexion looked moldy. "Come in, son!"

In the suite Ellery found the State Boxing Commissioner, nine leading citizens of Wickiup, and Tootsie Cogan, Billy the Kid's bald little manager. Tootsie was crying, and the other gentlemen looked half inclined to join him.

"What's the matter?" asked Ellery.

"The Kid," growled Sam Pugh, "has been kidnaped."

"Snatched," wept Cogan. "At three o'clock I feed him a rare steak at Mr. Pugh's ranch and I make him lay down for a snooze. I run over for a last-minute yak with Chick Kraus, the Champ's manager, about the rules, and while I'm gone —"

"Four masked men with guns snatched the kid," said the cattleman. "We've been negotiating with them by phone ever since. They want a hundred thousand dollars' ransom."

"Or no fight," snarled the Boxing Commissioner. "Eastern gangsters!"

"It'll ruin us," groaned one of the local elite. "The businessmen of this town put up a quarter of a million guarantee. Not to mention the lawsuits —"

"I think I get the picture, gentlemen," said Ellery. "With the fight less than ninety minutes off, there's no time to climb a high horse. I take it you're paying?"

"We've raised the cash among us," said the old cattleman, nodding toward a bloated brief case on the table, "and, Ellery, we've told 'em that you're going to deliver it. Will you?"

"You know I will, Sam," said Ellery. "Maybe I can get a line on them at the same time —"

"No, you'll put the whammy on it!" shrieked the Kid's manager. "Just get my boy back, in shape to climb in that ring!"

"You couldn't, anyway. They're not showing their dirty faces," rasped Sam Pugh. "They've named a neutral party, too, and he's acting for them."

"What you might call a matter of seconds, eh? Who is he, Sam?"

"Know Sime Jackman, the newspaperman?"

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"The dean of West Coast sportswriters? By reputation only; it's tops. Maybe if Jackman and I work together —"

"Sime's had to promise he'd keep his mouth shut," said the Boxing Commissioner, "and in the forty years I've known him, damn it, he's never broken his word. Forget the sleuthing, Mr. Queen. Just see that Billy Bolo gets back in time."

"All right," sighed Ellery. "Sam, what do I do?"

"At seven o'clock sharp," said the cattleman, "you're to be in Sime Jackman's room at the Western Hotel — Room 442. Jackman will then notify the kidnapers some way that you're there with the ransom, and Billy Bolo will be released. They've promised that the Kid will walk into this room by seven fifteen, unharmed and ready to climb into the ring, if we keep our word."

"How do you know they'll keep theirs?"

"You're not to leave the money with Jackman till I phone you, in his room, that the Kid's back safe."

"Then you'd better give me a password, Sam — voices can be imitated. In my ear . . . if you gentlemen don't mind?"

A stocky man with white hair and keen blue eyes opened the door of Room 442 in the Western Hotel at Ellery's rap.

"You're Queen, I take it. Come on in. I'm Sime Jackman."

Ellery looked around while the newspaperman shut the door. On the telephone table stood a battered portable typewriter and a bottle of Scotch. There was no one else in the room.

"I think," said Ellery, "I'd like some identification."

The white-haired man stared. Then he grinned and fished in his pockets. "Driver's license — press card — you'll find my name engraved on the back of this presentation watch from the National Sportswriters' Association —"

"I'm sold." Ellery opened the brief case and dumped its contents on the bed. The money was in $1,000 bundles, marked on the bank wrappers — tens, twenties, and fifties. "Are you going to take the time to count it?"

"Hell, no. I want to see that fight tonight!" The sportswriter went to the window.

"I was told you'd immediately notify the kidnapers."

"That's what I'm doing." Jackman raised and lowered the windowshade rapidly several times. "You don't think those lice gave me any phone numbers, do you? This is the signal I was told to give — they must have a man watching my window. I suppose he'll phone them it's okay. Well, that's that."

"Have you actually seen any of them?" Ellery asked.

"Have a heart, Queen," grinned the newspaperman. "I gave my word I wouldn't answer any questions. Well, now all we can do is wait for Sam Pugh's phone call. How about a drink?"

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"I'll take a rain check." Ellery sat down on the bed beside the ransom money. "What's the *modus operandi*, Jackman? How do you get the money to them?"

But the white haired man merely poured himself a drink. "Ought to be a pretty good scrap," he murmured.

"You win," said Ellery ruefully. "Yes, it should. How do you rate Bolo's chances? After all this, his nerves will be shot higher than Pike's Peak."

"The Kid? He was born without any. And when he gets mad, the way he must be right now —"

"Then you think he's got a chance to take the Champ?"

"If those punks didn't sap him, I make it the Kid by a K.O."

"You're the expert. You figure he's got the punch to put a bull like the Champ away?"

"Did you see the Kid's last fight?" smiled the sportswriter. "Artie Starr's nobody's setup. Yet Bolo hit him three right hooks so fast and murderous the second and third exploded on Starr's chin while he was still on his way to the canvas. It took his handlers ten minutes to bring him to —"

The phone made them both jump.

"They must have had the Kid around the corner!" Ellery said.

"You better answer it."

Ellery raced to the phone. "Queen speaking. Who is this?"

"It's me — Sam!" roared Sam Pugh's voice. "Listen, son —"

"Hold it. What's the password?"

"Oh! Solar plexus." Ellery nodded, relieved. "The Kid's back, Ellery," the cattleman exulted, "and he's all riled up and r'arin' to go. Release the money. See you at ringside!" His phone clicked.

"Okay?" smiled the white haired man.

"Yes," Ellery smiled back, "so now I can let you have it." And, swinging the telephone receiver, Ellery clubbed him neatly above the left ear. He was over at the clothes closet yanking the door open even before the white haired man bounced on the carpet. "So it *was* the closet he parked you in," Ellery said cheerfully to the trussed, gagged figure on the closet floor. "Well, we'll have you out of these ropes in a jiffy, Mr. Jackman, and then we'll settle the hash of this doublecrossing road agent!"

While the real Sime Jackman stood guard over the prostrate man, Ellery stuffed the money back into the brief case. "Hijacker?" asked the newspaperman without rancor.

"No, indeed," said Ellery. "He couldn't have been a hijacker, because the gang released the Kid after this man gave the signal. So I knew he was one of them. When they told you I was to be the contact man, you said something about you and me not knowing each other, didn't you? I thought so. That's what gave this operator his big idea. He'd put you on ice, and when I handed him the ransom thinking he was you, he'd run out on his pals."

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"But how," demanded the sports-writer, "did you know he wasn't me?"

"He said in the Bolo-Starr fight the Kid flattened Starr with three right hooks. You could hardly have become the dean of West Coast sports-writers and a national fight expert, Jackman, without learning that in the lexicon of boxing there's no such blow as a right hook for a fighter with the orthodox stance. The right hand equivalent of a left hook is a right cross."

"Why, the palooka," scowled the newspaperman, taking a fresh grip on the unconscious gangster's gun as the man stirred. "But about this ransom, Queen. I don't know what to do. After all, the rest of the gang did keep their word and return the Kid. Do I keep mine and deliver the dough to them, or does this bum's double-cross take me off the hook?"

"Hm. Nice problem in ethics." Ellery glanced at his watch and frowned. "We'll miss the fight unless we hurry! Tell you what, Sime."

"What?"

"We'll pass the buck — or should I say bucks? — to a higher authority." Ellery grinned and picked up the bruised phone. "Desk? Two reliable cops for immediate guard duty, if you please, and meanwhile get me the nearest office of the F.B.I. — rush!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **C. B. GILFORD**

TITLE: ***Joy Ride***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: A city in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A mature, intelligent man versus four boys out for kicks . . . a grim, cruel, and terrifying situation all too prevalent these days . . .*

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER THEY really meant any harm," Miles Rennie told the policeman who had arrived in the cruiser.

"You didn't see any of the kids?"

"No," Miles Rennie admitted, "I didn't get a good look at any of them."

"How many were there?"

"About six, I guess. Four boys and two girls. The boys were as big as me. But they were just youngsters."

"Uh-huh." The cop didn't bother to write anything in his notebook.

"And what did you say they did?"

"Well, I had my car parked there in the driveway. It's brand-new, you see. Maybe that's what attracted them."

The cop flicked a brief glance in the direction of the car. It was a long, sleek-looking convertible. The street lamp and the light from Miles Rennie's living room shone on it, making the chrome glitter.

"Okay, can you tell me exactly what happened, Mr. Rennie?"

"Well, I heard this noise, and I looked out. I saw this gang of kids fooling around my car. I knew they didn't belong here. I'm sure they weren't real car thieves. It would be a silly way to steal a car, right in the driveway, and making all the noise they did. Anyway, I came out on the front porch and I yelled at them, 'Hey, what are you kids trying to do?' "

"What did they say to that?" But the cop also had one ear cocked for the calls coming over the radio in the cruiser parked in the street.

"At first they didn't say anything. I guess I surprised them. 'You were trying to steal my car,' I yelled at

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them. 'I'm going to call the police. Now you kids get out of here.' And I went out after 'em."

"What did they do then, Mr. Rennie?"

"Well, they weren't very brave, When I went after 'em they ran. Then I saw they had a car of their own, an old Chevy I think it was, about a '36."

The cop wrote finally. Then he asked, "Did you get their license number?"

"No, I didn't. The car didn't have any tail lights, you see. And they drove away mighty fast."

The cop closed his notebook. "That all, Mr. Rennie?"

Miles Rennie hesitated. He wasn't accustomed to the emotion of anger. His anger finally got the better of him.

"There was something else," he said.

The cop waited.

"They called me names, Officer," Rennie blurted. "At the tops of their voices, as they were getting into their car and driving off. I'm a middle-aged man, and they were just young punks."

"What kind of names, Mr. Rennie?"

Rennie hesitated again. "I'd rather not repeat them," he said. "They were dirty names. And they had girls with them. They were just kids. I don't understand it. I didn't even know words like that when I was their age."

The cop nodded. He was practical. "Why don't you forget about it, Mr. Rennie? And keep your car in your garage after dark."

"But this driveway is my property. It isn't like keeping my car in the street . . ."

"Sure. You let us know if you have any more trouble. And next time try to get their license number."

"Do you think there'll be a next time?"

"That's hard to say, Mr. Rennie."

The police cruiser drove off. Miles Rennie put his new car in his garage and went back into the house. He didn't go to bed right away. He was disturbed.

Paul was a good-looking kid. That was probably why so many girls liked him. But boys liked him, too. He had a jalopy, and it was fun to hang around with him. He was always thinking up things to do. But even a boy with imagination sometimes runs out of ideas.

"What'll we do tonight?" Dirk asked him.

"I don't know. Take a ride, I guess."

"Nuts."

"All right, you figure out something."

"We could do our homework." This was from Arnold who was the wit of the gang.

Vince, the fourth boy in the group, chimed in: "I don't want to stay home. So we go for a ride. Any place different?"

"There ain't any place different."

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"Well, I'd rather go anywhere than stay home."

"I got an idea," Paul said.

"Yeah?"

"Remember that old guy that got so hot and bothered when we were looking at his car?"

"The green Olds?"

"I'd sure like to take a ride in that baby," Paul said.

They didn't answer him for a moment. It was a bold idea.

"What do you mean?" Dirk wanted to know.

"Just what I said."

"You mean steal it?"

"I didn't say steal it, stupid. I just said take a ride in it. You know, put the top down, pick up some girls, take a long ride out in the country."

"What happens after that? That old guy'll call the cops."

"He won't even know it's gone for awhile. By the time the cops get around to looking, we're finished with it anyway. We just leave it somewhere. Let the cops find it. Nothing happens to us. Guys do it all the time."

"It's okay with me," Vince said. "I don't want to stay home."

"There's cars sitting around everywhere." Dirk pointed this out. "Why go clear out to that old guy's house?"

Paul appraised them silently for a moment. He had brown eyes and curly dark hair. "I want to ride in that old guy's car," he said.

"How come? You got a reason?"

"Sure I got a reason. I don't like that old guy."

Miles Rennie hadn't forgotten the kids, even after a week. Though he believed persistently in the notion that a man's home—with driveway—is his castle, he'd got into the habit of driving his new car straight into the garage. He locked the garage, too.

He wasn't very satisfied with himself on that score. He had the feeling that he was acting like a coward. He was a grown man. He should be able to handle those kids if they came back. Not by overpowering them physically, of course. But by virtue of being a mature, intelligent man.

Would he, though, be able to do that? He wondered, deep inside himself. The thought was like a worm, eating away.

His wife asked him, "What's the matter with you, Miles?"

"Nothing."

"You act nervous."

"I'm not nervous." But he knew he was. And he knew he was making her nervous, too. Grace was nervous by nature. It had been almost fortunate that they hadn't had any children.

"Do you mind if I turn on the television, then?"

He didn't like television plays. Too many unpleasant things. But he let her have her way. So they were watching one of those unpleasant dramas, and the room was filled with the noise of it, when they both heard the other noise. The noise outside.

"Miles, what was that?"

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He sat frozen, waiting for anger to come and with it courage.

"Miles, maybe it's those kids again."

He knew it was.

"Miles, go out and see what they're doing."

He knew what they were doing.

"Miles, go out and see!"

"All *right*, Grace!"

He was angry at last. He strode to the front door, flicked on the porch light, and went outside. He knew just where to look for them. The dark, shadowy figures were clustered in front of the garage. One of them seemed to be working on the lock.

"Hey, what are you doing?" His voice was strident, too high-pitched to be really commanding.

They didn't seem at all surprised by his appearance. They weren't afraid this time, either, because they didn't retreat. But the one who'd been picking the lock stopped.

"Where's your car, mister?" that one asked.

"In the garage where it belongs," he answered, almost without realizing the impertinence of the question. "Now you kids better go on home."

They didn't move. They stood and stared back at him. They were in shadow and he couldn't really see any of their faces. But they could see him because he was in the glare of the porch light, a little ridiculous in his shirtsleeves, his face angry with helplessness.

"I know you," he shouted at them. "You're the same kids who were here the other night. I called the police before, and I'll call them again."

A derisive laugh sounded from the group. "What good did it do you to call the cops, mister?" They all laughed again.

Their laughter made him furious. He charged out toward them. None of them gave ground. They surprised him a little. In his mind they had assumed the shapes of devils. But they were just kids, nice-looking kids. Their faces were mocking, but hardly sinister. The one who'd been working at the lock—he seemed to be their leader—was even handsome. Not a trace of evil about him.

"You were after my car. I saw you fooling around with the lock." The absurd aspect of this conversation would occur to Rennie later. Now he knew only his rage.

"We weren't going to steal your car, mister. We just wanted to take a little ride." The handsome boy spoke in mock innocence.

"Get off my property." Rennie knew his voice was out of control, betraying his impotence. He repeated the warning, screaming. "Get off my property!"

They merely stared back at him, the boys slouching, hands in their pockets, the two girls giggling a little.

"I'll call the police," Rennie choked. "I've seen your faces. I can give them a good description."

One of the boys lit a cigarette. His features were etched in the glow

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of the match, a young face in which the cigarette looked out of place. The boy flicked the dying match insolently into the grass.

Miles Rennie felt the primitive urge to strike out, to smash those young faces, to see blood.

But then, as quickly as it had come, it left him. A moment of blind courage—then it was usurped by fear. These boys, young as they looked, were as big as he was. And there were four of them.

"I'll give you one last chance," he said hoarsely. "If you don't leave right now, I'm going to call the police."

What was he afraid of? he asked himself wildly. He was the good citizen. They were the criminals. Why weren't they scared of him? Shouldn't criminals be frightened when threatened with the law?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the boys move a step or two. To get behind him, perhaps. He didn't know. But it was enough.

He was not sure whether he walked or ran. But he knew that he beat a retreat ignominiously, tears of frustration in his eyes.

"Grace," he said, "call the police. Hurry!

A grown man crying. He felt sick and ashamed.

But it was worse than that.

He was afraid.

"And you didn't get their license number?" the cop asked again.

It was a different cop this time. This one was bigger, less sympathetic, less tolerant of the inefficiency and stupidity of people who expected the police to protect them and yet didn't give the police any help.

"No, I didn't," Rennie admitted.

"Look, Mr. Rennie," the cop said. "If this happened before, you ought to know what to do. We need a license number. Descriptions won't do any good unless we get hold of the kids, pick them up for some other reason maybe."

"I understand," Rennie said regretfully.

"Okay. Next time you be ready for 'em. Get their number."

"Do you think they'll be back?" Fear bubbled up in Rennie's voice.

"They'll be back. From what you told me, they sound like mean kids."

"I need protection, Officer."

The cop scowled. But he kept his voice polite. "Sure, Mr. Rennie," he said, "we'll do what we can. We'll drive by now and then. That ought to scare 'em away."

"But I'm a citizen," Miles Rennie cried. "I pay taxes. I pay plenty. That's what my taxes are for. Protection . . ."

The cop shook his big, grizzled head. "You couldn't afford the kind of protection you want, Mr. Rennie."

They were listening to records. The singer was throaty, seductive, panting lyrics with double meanings. Paul was lying on his back, dreamily watching the smoke from his cigarette curl upward.

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"That was kicks," he murmured, almost to himself.

"What was kicks?" Dirk wanted to know.

"Last night. At that old guy's house."

"It was okay."

Paul came up suddenly on one elbow. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Didn't you like it?"

"Sure I liked it. I don't know, though. We could have got into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The cops. Supposing the cops had come around while we were there?"

"The cops just don't come around, stupid. Somebody's got to call 'em first."

"Well, supposing that old guy had started something?"

Paul lay back again, staring at the ceiling. "It was a good thing for him he didn't start anything," he said softly. "There were four of us."

"I could have handled him myself," Arnold said.

Paul smiled. "We didn't have to worry," he said. "Didn't you notice? He was scared."

"You think he was?"

"Sure. Couldn't you tell? Scared stiff."

The record changed automatically. The rhythm went south, became a swift, passionate throb. The other three boys began tapping feet, swaying to the beat of it. Paul lay quietly, far from that little sound-filled room. He didn't speak till the record stopped.

"You know something?" Paul's voice was low.

"What?"

"That I liked."

"Sure, man, that was the greatest."

"I don't mean the record. I mean last night. That old guy. He was panicked. That I liked."

"How do you mean, Paul?"

"Nobody's ever been scared of me before. I was always supposed to be scared of other people. But I ain't any more. Now it's time for somebody to be scared of me. That I like. And that old guy is plenty scared."

The other boys considered. Nobody thought about putting on a new stack of records.

"I'll bet he's wondering if we're going to come back," Paul said.

"Are we going back?" Vince asked hopefully.

"Maybe."

"You still want a ride in that car of his, huh?"

"Sure I do." Paul lit another cigarette, letting them wait for a moment. "But the ride ain't the most important thing any more. It's scaring that old guy."

Grace Rennie showed her husband the letter the instant he arrived home from work. He read the envelope first. There was no name, only the street address. Miles Rennie opened it with trembling hands. What he saw was a sheet of rough white paper, on which was a brief

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message printed in large, irregular letters, obviously disguised. *Dear Sir,* it read. *We want to take a ride in your car and we mean business. Leave it parked outside tonight and leave the keys too. Do as we say or you'll be sorry.*

There was no signature.

Rennie sat down and read it over and over again. He was aware that his palms and forehead were damp, that he had an empty feeling in his stomach. "I guess I'd better call the police," he said.

They waited for the cruiser to arrive. It was the big, rough cop again. He read the letter.

"Those kids aren't very smart," he said finally.

The Rennies didn't understand.

"I'll show this to the Lieutenant down at headquarters," the cop explained. "What we'll probably do is arrange a stake-out. You do just what the kids ask. Leave your car outside with the keys in it. Only we'll be around, out of sight. We wait till the kids show up and grab the car. Then we grab them."

Rennie nodded. "You mean you'll use my car as bait?"

"Yes, sir. That's the way it works."

"All right. Whatever you say . . ."

The Rennies felt better after the officer's visit. The police seemed concerned now. They were doing something. Surely, Miles told his wife, a bunch of kids couldn't outwit or elude the whole police force.

"But I don't get it," Dirk said. "We send this letter, and then we don't do nothing."

"Maybe," Vince suggested, "he had the car parked outside waiting for us."

Paul looked at them contemptuously. "Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. And maybe he had cops waiting around, too."

"Well, I still don't get it," Dirk insisted. "What do we do now?"

In the last few days Paul had developed an air of superiority. "There's no hurry, is there? Suppose he did have the car outside? We'd have a ride in it, and then the kicks would be over. You know what I want? I want to get that old guy *real* scared."

The other boys agreed in silence, a little wonderingly. They were doing their best to follow the workings of Paul's mind. But the goal of their enterprise seemed to be shifting. First it had been just a ride in the car.

"I got a little work for you," Paul was telling them. "I'd like to know the old guy's name and phone number. You all know his address, don't you? Beat it out there and ask a few questions in the neighborhood stores. It'll be easy—but be careful."

"It may take a little time," Arnold objected.

In answer Paul gave Arnold a shove in the chest. A small shove, but full of warning. "What's the hurry, Arnold?"

"No hurry, I guess."

Paul smiled. "I said I wanted to

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get the old boy real scared, didn't I? Well, that may take a little time. But I promise you something. When we get through with that guy, he's going to be so scared he'll *give* us the car."

It was past 2 when the telephone jangled. Miles Rennie had just fallen asleep. He dragged himself to the instrument in a half-stupor.

"Is that you, Mr. Rennie?"

He knew that voice. It belonged to the handsome boy who had worked at the lock of the garage.

"Wake up, Mr. Rennie," the voice said pleasantly.

He was awake now, all right. He would never sleep quite so soundly again in his whole life.

"How's about the car, Mr. Rennie? Don't you read your mail?"

Miles made no answer. He was sweating. He could hear his wife moving in bed, awake and listening. He wanted to seem brave and resourceful for her sake. But he didn't know what to say.

"Are you still there, Mr. Rennie?" the young voice taunted.

"Yes . . ."

"What about the car, Mr. Rennie? You ain't been doing what you were told."

The gang—Miles Rennie thought of them as a gang now—must be aware of his every move. He felt like an insect under a microscope.

"The car was parked outside," he began unconvincingly.

"And where were the cops?"

"There weren't any cops here. I swear it!" Rennie bit his lip. He had said too much. He knew he had said too much. That boy was smart.

"You doublecrossed us, didn't you, Mr. Rennie? Now let me tell you something. You're going to be sorry for that."

"Look here . . ."

"You're going to be sorry, Mr. Rennie."

The line went dead. Rennie hung up violently and stood there, fighting for control. That cheap little punk . . .

"Was it those kids?" Grace quavered from the dark bedroom.

"Yes."

"What did they want?"

"My God, Grace, I wish I knew!"

"Miles . . ."

"Well, tell me if *you* know!" He went back into the bedroom and faced her in the dark. "What do they want? A ride in my car! If they wanted to steal the car, keep it or sell it, there'd be some sense to this. But all they seem to want is to take a ride in it. A joy ride!"

"Miles . . ."

He was weeping.

"A joy ride! They're putting us through all this just for a joy ride!"

He went to her, the delicate one, the nervous one, and she put her arms around him. He clung to her in the darkness, hating himself.

The police, the Rennies were told, would give this case the full treatment. The potential danger was

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considerable, they said. This gang of boys was unpredictable.

The stake-out was to continue. Only now Rennie would keep his car in the garage, and if the boys tried to gain entrance to the garage the police would nab them immediately.

The Rennies also received instructions about the phone. If the gang called again, whoever answered the phone should try to keep the conversation going as long as possible. Using the police car radio, the officers could trace the call.

So it was simply a matter of waiting. There would be policemen on duty from dusk to dawn.

Everything went according to plan—except for one thing. The gang disappeared as completely as if it had never existed.

A week passed.

Actually, Miles Rennie was elated. From his viewpoint it couldn't have turned out better. Now neither he nor his wife would have to appear as witnesses, or to press charges. All the sordidness would be avoided. The boys had lost either courage or interest. Miles Rennie could even begin to feel a little kindly toward them.

"Kids," he remarked to his wife. "Kids never do what you expect them to do, do they?"

Grace Rennie had had one of her usual uneventful days. Now at four in the afternoon she had to begin thinking of Miles's dinner.

So she was in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She peeked through the living-room window and saw that it was a boy. He was harmless-looking. And he was alone.

She hesitated. But then she said to herself, I shouldn't judge all boys by the ones who had made the trouble about the car.

She opened the door.

Even so, she talked to him through the screen. "Yes, what is it?"

The boy was holding a small package of washing powder. "Free sample," he said.

She unlocked the screen to take the box. The boy grabbed the handle of the screen door, yanking it out of her hands. Three other boys materialized out of nowhere. In an instant all four of them were pushing their way inside.

Grace Rennie was too surprised to scream or even protest. She was borne along by the press of their surging bodies, back into the house, and the door slammed shut behind them. She was a prisoner of the four young intruders.

"Watch the old lady, Arnold," the good-looking one said.

The boy called Arnold propelled her across the room and half-shoved, half-threw her on the sofa. The other three boys disappeared into other regions of the house.

"What are you doing?" she finally gasped.

Arnold stood guard in front of her, hands thrust into the pockets of his blue jeans. He was big and

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ugly, and his mocking grin made him uglier. "We're looking for your husband's other set of car keys."

Outraged, she struggled to her feet. "You can't do that. This is my . . ."

He put his right hand against her shoulder and pushed her down again. Grace Rennie began to cry.

She could hear hideous sounds from the other rooms—dresser drawers being pulled out and dropped on the floor, closet doors flung open, clothing ripped and shredded, and once the crash of breaking glass.

The boy who guarded her seemed restless, as if he would have preferred to join the vandals. But he stayed where he was.

She knew when the marauders went into the kitchen, because the sounds changed. First, the clanging of pots and pans, then the glassware, the dishes. Crash, bang, smash . . .

Finally the three boys reappeared, shaking bits of glass and crockery off their clothes.

"What do you know?" their leader said to the boy called Arnold. "We can't find the keys anywhere."

Then they were in her living room and dining room, where they could perform in her view, where restless Arnold could also enjoy the fun.

Grace Rennie closed her eyes. "Stop it . . . this is my house . . . these are my things . . . my precious things . . . Have mercy, please, please!" If she could only get the words out . . . but her tongue was paralyzed.

In spite of herself she opened her eyes. Pictures torn from the walls, sofa cushions ripped with a razor-sharp knife, the heavy ceramic ashtray hurled into the glass screen of the television set. It was a nightmare. Surely she was dreaming all this . . .

"Hey, old lady." It was the handsome boy, the leader of the pack. "Where you got those keys hid?"

For the first time, with all of the boys staring at her, Mrs. Rennie suddenly knew fear—fear that squeezed her heart with a cold hand and plucked words out of her. "I don't know! I don't drive the car, I don't have any keys . . ."

"She's lying," Arnold said.

"Yeah," another boy said. "Her head off."

The handsome boy just looked at her.

"What'll we do with her?" Arnold asked.

What will we do with her?

There was silence. The boys seemed to be working themselves up to something. They needed a fit ending for their raid. Something big—a real kick.

Then the ugly boy, Arnold, giggled and whispered in the leader's ear. He looked over at Grace Rennie.

She knew . . . she *knew* what had been whispered. And she could not scream . . .

The handsome boy was shaking his head. "We'll save that for the next time," he said.

But Grace Rennie was unconscious.

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The man who sat in the chair before Police Captain Newman's desk seemed to be in a trance. His face was gray, his eyes focused on nothing.

"Mr. Rennie," Captain Newman said, "I want to assure you that the police department will do everything in its power to find those four boys."

Miles Rennie looked up. He spoke slowly, as if from a great distance. "It's too late."

"She wasn't harmed, Mr. Rennie."

"Not physically."

"But the doctors said—"

"The doctors don't know my wife the way I do. She's a very sensitive woman."

"I realize, Mr. Rennie, she must have had a shocking experience. We'll do everything possible . . ."

Rennie shook himself a little. "What will you do?"

"We'll maintain a constant patrol."

"Day and night?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Well, I don't know. That may depend on developments."

"Those hoodlums are smart. They'll be patient. You can't spare the necessary men indefinitely."

Captain Newman leaned across the desk toward his visitor, looking uncomfortable. "Frankly," he said, "you're right. We couldn't continue such an arrangement indefinitely. There's no way of guaranteeing *absolute* protection . . ."

Rennie rose bitterly. "If the police can't protect me," he wanted to know, "what am I supposed to do?"

In the quiet of the hospital room he heard the nurse say, "I've given your wife a sedative, Mr. Rennie. She'll sleep now."

"I'm going, Grace," he said. "I'll be back soon."

"Miles." Grace Rennie's voice was wild, urgent. Fear still glistened in her eyes.

"Yes?"

"Promise me, Miles."

"Of course . . ."

"There's only one way to stop them, Miles. Let them have the car."

He tried to smile. "I promise."

"Miles, don't leave me!"

When she fell asleep Miles Rennie left. It was past midnight. A nurse stopped him in the corridor. There was a telephone call for him. He followed her to the floor desk.

"Hello," he said.

"How is Mrs. Rennie?" a voice asked in reply.

He hesitated only for a second. "How did you locate me here?"

"It was easy. We've been calling hospitals and asking if they had a Mrs. Rennie." The voice laughed. *Kids never do what you expect them to do, do they?*

"Maybe you've learned your lesson, Mr. Rennie?" the voice continued.

"Yes, I've learned my lesson."

"Ready to cooperate?"

"I'm ready," Miles answered.

"Then how about the car?"

"You can have the car."

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There was a surprised silence.

"When?" the boy asked incredulously.

"Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"You can have it right now," Miles Rennie said.

There was a buzz of conversation at the other end of the wire.

"Where?" the boy demanded.

"I'll meet you at the corner of Manning and Foster."

"You set this up with the cops?" The boy was heavily suspicious, almost uncertain. "If you bring the cops with you . . ."

"No cops. I'll be all alone. I want to get this over with."

The voice laughed silkily. "Now you're being smart, Mr. Rennie. What corner did you say? Manning and Foster?"

"Yes. In about twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes?" Another buzz.

In his mind he pictured Manning and Foster. A dark, lonely corner that he had passed coming to the hospital. Somebody—juvenile vandals perhaps—had smashed the street light.

"We'll be there," the voice said.

Miles Rennie fumbled in the pocket of his topcoat. The gun was still there. The gun he had bought that afternoon, after his talk with Captain Newman.

"So will I," Miles Rennie said, and he hung up.

He kept the engine running, made sure about the doors. Left front door unlocked. All others locked and the windows raised. He was ready.

The boys didn't appear immediately. He hadn't expected them to. They would wait to make certain no police cruiser had tailed him. They would approach cautiously till they found out whether he was alone in the car.

When it happened, it happened suddenly. Three boys at the right side of the car, futilely trying to open the doors. The handsome boy, the leader and phone caller, on the driver's side. The door yielded and he slipped inside.

Rennie moved over for him.

"Say, you weren't fooling," the boy said with a laugh.

"No," Rennie said. And he snapped on the dome light so the boy could see the gun.

The boy saw. So did the others, the ones trying to get in. They saw where the gun was pointing. They saw that a bullet, if fired, would plow in under their leader's ribs and into his abdomen. They saw that the hand holding the gun was tense but steady, that the face of Miles Rennie was different from the face they remembered.

The boys on the sidewalk turned and fled. One moment they were there, the next they were gone. The boy trapped in the car looked wildly past the gun, past the hand holding it.

"Hey, guys!" he yelped. "Don't leave me holding the bag! You dirty—"

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But they were gone.

"Let's go," Rennie said.

"Go? Where? What do you mean?"

"You wanted a ride in my car. All right, you're going to get it. Drive."

He waited to see what he wanted to see. The smirk, the mockery, the triumph leaving the young face. The terror, stark, animal, replacing it. He waited till the boy's face resembled Grace's. Then Rennie switched off the dome light.

"Automatic shift," he said. "Just give it the gas. This car has everything."

With a jerk the convertible left the curb. It picked up speed powerfully.

"Where we going?" the boy asked. His voice squeaked.

"You're the driver," Rennie said. "Find a place where you can really let her out. See what she'll do. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? All right, here's your chance."

The boy licked his lips. The car hurtled through the dark streets. Street lights blurred past.

"Faster," Rennie said. "This car will do over a hundred."

"We'll pick up a cop," the boy mumbled.

"You're not afraid of cops. Remember?"

The downtown streets were deserted at this hour. Once they nearly crashed into a truck at an intersection. The boy swerved just in time, then slowed down.

"What's the matter with you?" Rennie asked. "I thought you'd get a kick out of this." He brought the gun up a little. "Step on the gas."

The boy edged away from the gun, accelerated. The convertible leaped ahead with a roar. The lights from another car came at them blindingly. Rennie watched the boy's face. It was glistening with sweat. The lips moved in a curse. Or a prayer.

"Faster," Rennie said. "This isn't a milk wagon. Let her out."

"It won't go any faster," the boy whimpered.

"You mean you're scared?

"What do you want from me!" His lips were quivering now.

"Step on that gas pedal! Right down to the floor."

The boy obeyed. In the flash at an intersection Rennie saw his face again. It was yellow with fear.

"We'll crack up sure," the boy stuttered. "You nuts or something?"

Rennie smiled. "Where's your nerve, sonny? You had plenty yesterday when you and your pals wrecked my house and pushed my wife around. You weren't afraid of her, or me, or even the police, as long as we didn't know your names or where you come from. Now you're scared to death. Aren't you?" Rennie prodded him gently with the muzzle of the gun. *"Aren't you?"*

"You want me to say it, don't you?" the boy babbled. "Okay, I'm scared, I'm chicken!"

"Say it again."

"I'm chicken, chicken, chicken!" He was sobbing.

Rennie was silent.

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"Now can I slow down, Mr. Rennie? *Please?*"

"Yes."

The boy's foot dropped off the gas pedal as if it burned. The car lost speed quickly. The boy's harsh breathing became audible.

"Pull over to the curb."

The car rocked to a stop under a street light. Rennie saw the boy's hands, still clinging to the steering wheel. They were shaking violently. His eyes were slewed around to the gun in Rennie's hand. They remained that way, fascinated.

"Can I . . . get out now, Mr. Rennie?"

Rennie did not reply.

"What are you going to do now?"

Rennie said nothing.

"You're just . . . kidding, ain't you, Mr. Rennie?" His voice was a weak treble, like a very small boy's. "Pointing that gun at me, I mean . . . Mr. Rennie. *Mr. Rennie, don't shoot me! I won't do it again! My father will pay for the damage, for your old lady's hospital bill! Just don't shoot me!"*

Miles Rennie sat listening to the boy's sobs, sat tasting the abject surrender. But his victory had lost its savor.

He suddenly felt very tired.

"I'm not going to shoot you," he said. "Come on—start up again."

"Where we going?"

"To the police station."

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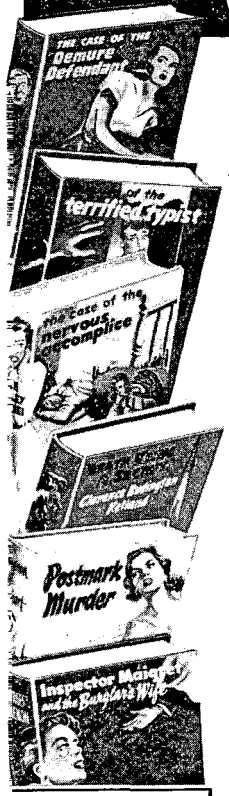
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